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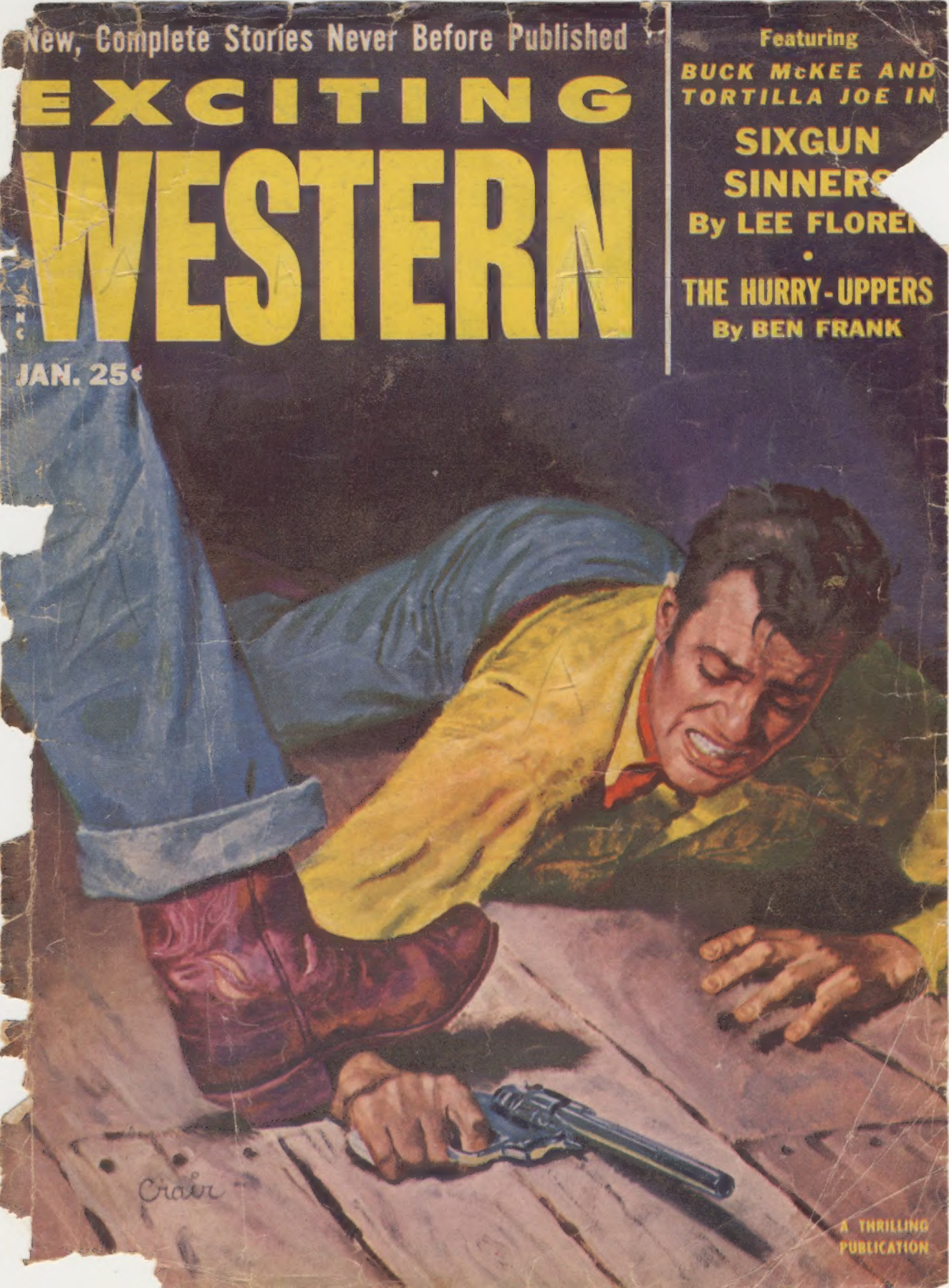

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EXCITING WESTERN

Vol. 24, No. 3

JANUARY 1953

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

A Novel

SIXGUN SINNERS — Lee Floren — 10

Buck wanted his paws on that cold-blooded killer—and he had sizzling plans for a frosty female too!

A Novelet

NO TAPS FOR SERGEANT SHIELDS — T.C. McClary — 58

Everybody hated Shields—but they loved his guts!

Other Stories

WHEN A MAN STANDS ALONE — Hascal Giles — 49

They'd stabbed Irby's pard—and Irby did nothing!

THE FABULOUS CAVE (True) — Harold Helfer — 57

Did Jim find the treasure—or was it all a dream?

THE HURRY-UPPERS — Ben Frank — 76

Eddie was fast—especially at getting into trouble

THREE BLIND MICE — Frank R. Pierce — 88

The Nixons were neither blind—nor were they mice!

THE HAPPY HANGMAN'S HELPER (True) — Allan K. Echols — 99

Bill just loved to string gents up with his rope

BLOOD AND GUTS — Tom Roan — 100

Doc wanted that bear—and that bear wanted Doc!

Features

TRAIL BLAZERS	William Hopson	6
COW COUNTRY NEWS ROUNDUP	A Department	8
AMERICA'S OLDEST PROFESSION	Manly E. David	31
I AIN'T GOT NO USE FOR WOMEN (Verse)	Cecile Bonham	69
COWBOY BRAIN-TEASERS	Fun Page	85
WILDERNESS KNOW-HOW	Syl MacDowell	86
RODEO IS BIG BUSINESS	Tex Mumford	107

Also see "Sagebrush Sam Says—" on Pages 21, 63 and 81

DAVID X. MANNERS, Editor

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TRAIL BLAZERS

Here's how Jim Beckwourth became—absolute chief of the Crow Indians!

PROBABLY the average reader of early frontier history does not realize fully the speed and tremendous scope of operations involved in the exploration and settling of the millions of square miles of virgin territory west of St. Louis. Take the year 1804 when Lewis and Clarke left on an exploring expedition.

Fifty-five years later Russel, Majors and Waddell were operating 3500 freight wagons, each carrying a load of six thousand pounds, using forty thousand oxen that were handled by more than four thousand tough, reckless bullwhackers! Stage lines ran from Missouri to Salt Lake City and thence to Sacramento on a fifteen-day mail and passenger schedule. In charge of each stage was a regular conductor who made his two-hundred-and-fifty-mile run in two days, rested one day, and then returned over the same route.

A Remarkable Breed

But who filled in the gap between formal exploratory parties and the later settlers? The mountain trappers, probably the most remarkable breed of men that ever lived. Utterly without fear and contemptuous of money, these bearded men roamed a savage wilderness, where Indian fights were almost a weekly occurrence, looking for beaver signs as feverishly as the prospectors of a later era hunted gold. Beneath the moccasins of these fearless men who forded ice-filled streams to set beaver traps lay the huge fortunes in gold that were taken out by men not many years later. Any of them could have become rich by trading with the capricious Indians. Not one in a hundred bothered.

One among them did, however. His name was Jim Beckwourth. Beckwourth was a mulatto born in Virginia in 1798. His mother must have been rather light-skinned because Beckwourth, while dark, was not nearly so dark as the Crow Indians he later ruled as absolute chief. Why he left Virginia and how he ended up in St. Louis, a skilled shot and horseman at the age of fourteen, is lost in the events of one hundred and forty years ago. Suffice it to say that same year found him out in the wilderness with an army expedition, finding game for weak, hungry men when game had not been found by the party.

In a very short time Jim Beckwourth became one of that famous old breed of trapper. Upon leaving a fort or other base of supplies a man placed two blankets, a saddle, and a rope bridle on his horse. Behind it was another blanket containing an extra pair of dry moccasins. Two other pouches, to be snatched in case of losing the horse in an Indian fight, contained powder and lead, salt and pepper, a little flour and tobacco. He carried six beaver traps, sometimes on a pack horse, and rode with his rifle across the front of the saddle. He dressed in skin hat, buckskin shirt, deer or elk hide pants, and his moccasined feet were wrapped in blankets. His diet was eighty-five per cent wild

(Continued on page 112)

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"I recenty switched over from studio work and am now holding a position as service technician. I am still with RCA, enjoying my work more and more every day."—N. Ward, Ridgefield, N. J.

WANT YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown at left, says, "Am now tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often call back to NRI textbooks for information."

1. EXTRA MONEY IN SPARE TIME

Many students make $5, $10 a week and more EXTRA fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while learning. The day you enroll I start sending you SPECIAL BOOKLETS that show you how. Tester you build with kits I send helps you make extra money servicing sets, gives practical experience on circuits common to Radio and Television. All equipment is yours to keep.

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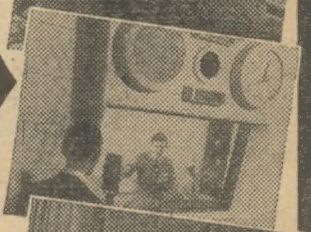
NRI Courses lead to these and many other jobs: Radio and TV service, P.A., Auto Radio, Lab, Factory, and Electronic Controls Technicians, Radio and TV Broadcasting, Police, Ship and Airways Operators and Technicians. Opportunities are increasing. The United States has over 105 million Radios—over 2,900 Broadcasting Stations—more expansion is on the way.



3. BRIGHT FUTURE

Think of the opportunities in Television. Over 15,000,000 TV sets are now in use; 108 TV stations are operating and 1800 new TV stations have been authorized . . . many of them expected to be in operation in 1953. This means more jobs—good pay jobs with bright futures. More operators, installation service technicians will be needed. Now is the time to get ready for a successful future in TV! Find out what Radio and TV offer you.

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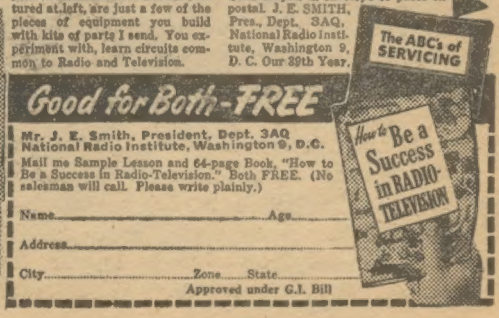

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Cow Country NEWS ROUNDUP

What's Happening Out West

IN DALLAS the other day, deputies ordered all patrons out of a tavern—then arrested the bartender for being drunk and disorderly.

✪ ✪ ✪

AN OVERSEAS SOLDIER, Lieutenant M. Henri, has offered Bozeman, Montana, his ranch as a picnic spot. Stationed in Europe, he can't enjoy his Bridge Canyon ranch, so he's invited the townsfolk to visit the place, enjoy its cold water, its flowers and huckleberries. "I can only daydream about my ranch," he wrote the local paper wistfully.

✪ ✪ ✪

PLANES spraying poison bran on 2,700,000 acres of Western range land killed 175,000 tons of grasshoppers in two weeks. Piled up, the grasshoppers would fill an average city block to a height of four-hundred feet.

✪ ✪ ✪

WHAT'S IN A NAME? Ura and Ima Link are the owners of a hot dog stand in Houston, Texas. And Mr. Drybread is a Longmont, Colorado, baker.

✪ ✪ ✪

THE WESTERN pulp and paper industry is going to undergo a tremendous expansion—so predicts a range specialist, S. Blair Hutchinson. He says there is enough timber east of the continental divide in Montana alone to supply eight pulp mills. There is only one now in the area.

✪ ✪ ✪

WHO SAYS the day of the rugged individualist is over? At Burlington, Colorado, Jim Gernhart enjoyed his funeral so much last year that he decided to stage another one this year. As before, mock last rites were given for the 75-year-old rancher, with a large crowd turning out. He'd planned to bring a 64-piece band from Cleveland to play for the occasion, but changed his mind at the last minute.

✪ ✪ ✪

AT DENVER, which has just about become the ski center of the nation, it was figured that a de luxe skiing outfit now costs around $250, with ski pants costing as much as $40. Brother, hand me my Levi's!

✪ ✪ ✪

AN EIGHT-STATE 2200-mile ceremony dedicated the "Main Street of America," U. S. Highway 66, as the Will Rogers Highway in honor of America's beloved cowboy humorist. Gov. Johnston Murray of Oklahoma and Will Rogers, Jr., the cowboy wit's son, placed the highway plaque at Claremore, Okla., the great cowboy's hometown.

✪ ✪ ✪

DIDJA KNOW? It pays to watch the hoofs of cattle on range land. If the hoofs become overgrown, they should be trimmed to lessen chances of foot trouble.

✪ ✪ ✪

IN SOME WAYS, Forest Yankey, a Nebraskan, has performed one of the greatest lariat feats of all time. With a cotton thread, he lassoed a common house fly.

✪ ✪ ✪

HAROLD HANK, of Perrytown, Texas, built himself a plane for $500, then taught himself how to fly it, so that he could drop food to snowbound cattle.

✪ ✪ ✪

AND SPEAKING of snow, there is an annual railroad snowplowing expedition from Ashton, Idaho, to West Yellowstone, Montana, every spring. The battle has to be waged in order to free the rail lines for passengers to this Western vacationland.

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When he began to manhandle Sybil, Buck slugged him

A Novel
by
LEE FLOREN

Buck McKee wanted to get his paws on two things. One was a cold-blooded killer. The other—a certain frosty female. He had hot plans for both!

Sixgun Sinners

CHAPTER I

Desert Death

HEADS down, Buck McKee and his Mexican partner, rode into the howling desert wind, with Tortilla Joe taking the lead. Suddenly, out of nowhere, another rider came around the hill, and his horse collided head-on with the fat Mexican's mount.

"What the hell ees thees?"

Tortilla Joe's squeaky yelp jerked up Buck McKee's head. Hurriedly the tall cowpuncher reined to one side to escape

entanglement. Then Tortilla Joe's horse was lying on one side, kicking like a wounded jack-rabbit. And the obese Mexican was sitting flatly on the hot sand, a startled look accentuating his thick jowls.

Buck looked at the other rider.

This rider also sat on the sand. Ten feet away a sweaty sorrel had staggered to his feet. The sorrel stood with his off foreleg lifted in pain. But Buck McKee was not interested in the lamed gelding. He was interested in the rider.

Her dress had slid up to expose broad expanses of smooth white thighs. Her hat hung across her back, held by the chin-strap. He saw black hair. He saw a small, lovely face, now showing anger.

Then, for some reason, he looked back at her knees.

Quickly he left saddle to kneel beside the young woman. "Did you skin your knee, miss?"

She yanked at the hem of her dress. "Keep your hands off my leg!" Her second yank got her knees covered. "I can get up alone!"

Buck stood up, grinning.

She got to her feet, then almost fell. Buck had her by the elbow. He saw pain show in her pretty face.

"My ankle—it's sprained!" she wailed.

"Your nigh leg," Buck commented. "Your bronc's off leg. You two should work together and sprain legs on the same side."

"Oh, shut your big mouth!"

A frosty female, eh? Buck glanced at Tortilla Joe who laboriously got his bulk on top of his legs. He seemed all right. He also looked at the girl.

"Get your hand off my elbow!" she ordered Buck.

He said, "I'll give it some thought." She had a nice elbow. Soft. Feminine. Sun-browned.

"Let—go—of—my arm!"

She swung. Buck ducked. He stepped back. Again she almost fell. She hobbled to a boulder, tears of anger in her eyes. She sat down. Tortilla Joe, his shock gone, studied his horse.

"My *caballo* he ees all right, Buckshot. But the weend she ees knock from out of my ribs." He cocked his dark head, listened, eyes shining. "Somewhere I hear riders een the heels and they come theer way, no?"

SUDDENLY the girl was on her feet. "Riders? I've got to get away! If they catch me— I've got to get to Cinch-ring Camp! I have to get help for Jack or they'll lynch him!"

Once more she almost fell.

Once more Buck held her.

The sound of horses' hoofs was closer.

Buck asked, "They going to lynch Jack *who?*"

"Jack Perry. Oh, you probably don't know him—both of you look like strangers to me! And I know almost everybody on this range. Help me to my horse, please?"

Buck glanced at Tortilla. Jack Perry, eh? He asked the girl, "Why do they aim to lynch this Perry, and who aims to hang him?"

"Jack is accused of murdering Old John Lawrence, and—"

Unexpectedly she ran for Buck's horse. Despite her sprained ankle, she acted quickly. Tortilla Joe grabbed for her, missed. Buck grabbed his partner by the shoulder.

"Let her go, Tortilla."

"She ees steal your horse, Buck!"

"Let her go."

The girl mounted, used her quirt. Buck's fresh horse went out fast, drifting with the wind. Back came her hurried, "Thanks for the use of your horse. I'll bring him back."

Then she was around a sand dune and out of sight.

Buck looked at Tortilla Joe. Tortilla Joe looked at Buck.

Buck said, "Jack Perry."

Tortilla Joe said, "And somebodys they aim to hang heem, no?"

"I don't savvy this."

"Troubles, Buckshot, troubles!"

Both turned. Riders were spilling over a hill. Riders coming toward them in wild determination. Pintos, roans, sor-

rels, bays, grays. In Buck and his partner the awareness of approaching danger mounted. They could smell it in the Arizona air. It howled on the Arizon wind.

Buck looked ahead for the girl. She was a speck in the sand-littered distance.

"Evidently Jack Perry has killed some fellow," he said to his partner. "That girl is riding to Cinchring Camp, wherever and whatever it is, for help because somebody aims to lynch Jack."

"Jack keel Ol' John Lawrence."

"You've heard of him, eh, Tortilla?"

"I hear of heem. He beeg cowman in thees Salt Reever country. Sometheeng she tell me we ees een trouble."

Buck squinted. "That tall jigger in the lead is a big gent," he said.

And a big man he was when he reined in before them. Big in body, big in arrogance. He sat a Phoenix saddle on a tough pinto. He wore a wide stetson, the chinstraps held together by a gold nugget that glistened in the sun. A buckskin jacket, gaudy with beads, covered wide shoulders and a thick chest. A red silk shirt, California pants, wide-winged Cheyenne chaps.

Behind him were his riders. Winchesters in saddle-holsters. Short guns in holsters. Riding winded, tired horses. A tough crew.

The big man's eyes took in the girl's lamed sorrel. Evidently he recognized the mount. "Where's the woman?" His voice was commanding.

"She stole my bronc," Buck said.

"She stole your *horse?*"

Suddenly a rider lifted a hand to point. His voice was an angry yip. "There she goes, Curt! Way yonder! And that horse is going like wildfire! Look at him travel!"

"Our broncs are winded," another rider snarled.

They turned hostile, probing eyes on Buck and Tortilla Joe as though they were to blame.

One man said, "We can take after her, but we'll never catch her!"

The big leader of the crew said sternly, "Forget that heifer!" The wind blew hard against his big carcass. His pale blue eyes on the two partners were harsh. "Who the hell are you two buckos, and what are you doing on the Salt River of Arizona Territory?"

Sand grated against McKee's face. Rough, cutting sand. The man's voice grated even harsher.

"I could ask you the same," he reminded coldly.

The big man grinned mirthlessly. Again he shot a quick glance at the woman galloping far ahead. "You ride a fast bronc, stranger."

"Sometimes it pays."

THE MAN'S hard eyes came back on Buck. A big hand went up and played with the gold nugget, sliding it up and down on the chin-straps. The wind was made shrill by sand stones. A horse rolled the cricket in his bit.

"You're on Hammerhead range," the big man said shortly.

"Means nothing to me." Buck shrugged.

"Talk!"

Buck said, "This woman who stole my mount rode down my partner's bronc into the sand. Hit him head-on. Wind muffled her coming. She grabs my bronc, drifts. She's got pretty knees. I tried to get my hands on them."

A rider laughed. The big man swiveled, gave the man a hard look. The rider stopped laughing. He said quietly, "Take it easy, Curt."

Another rider said, "She'll never get to Cinchring Camp in time. By the time them construction hands of Perry's get into Buckskin town, Jack Perry will be dancing on air."

"Forget the female, Curt," advised the rider who had laughed.

The big man nodded. "I'm Curt Lawrence," he told McKee. "Who are you two fellows?"

He emphasized the name "Lawrence." Evidently it was supposed to be impressive on this range of mesquite and juniper.

Curt Lawrence, Buck McKee was thinking. Jack Perry was accused of killing Old John Lawrence, the big cowman.

Could this big man be the shaggy wolf's shaggy son?

Buck introduced himself and Tortilla Joe. And then, without apparent reason, the brows of Curt Lawrence drew down again—scheming, ugly, mean.

"You two know Jack Perry, eh?"

Buck played ignorant. "Never have heard of him until now."

"Seems to me that Jack Perry mentioned you two gents was coming here to side him."

Hard eyes probed Buck. Curt Lawrence had his right hand on the handle of his pearl-handled six-shooter. Behind him, his men were suddenly tense, knife-sharp, suspicious.

Buck glanced sideways at Tortilla Joe. The Mexican's tongue came out to dampen thick lips. Short, dark fingers rested on the handle of the old .45 in its oiled holster.

And the Mexican's eyes, dark, and seemingly innocent, moved childishly from man to man. They touched this man. That man. They took silent stock of this danger.

Buck thought, This calls for caution and the right words. He said, "Perry had somebody else in mind."

"Those were the names," Curt Lawrence said huskily. "McKee and Tortilla Joe."

"You must be mistaken, Lawrence."

Their eyes met, held, made appraisals.

Buck had quick thoughts. One was that he and his partner should try to get into the town of Buckskin fast to prevent Jack Perry's lynching, though he had never seen the man. But he did know that Jack was Old Sam Perry's only child, and Sam was an old friend.

"Sorry, men," Curt Lawrence said quietly to the partners. "You two look like you need some grub and a shave. That girl—Claire McCullen—will bring your horse back, McKee. Why not climb on behind the Mex and ride into Buckskin with us?"

"That an order, Lawrence?"

A shrug. "Salty rooster. Maybe he needs his tail feathers pulled— McKee, don't force my hand."

Tortilla Joe came in with, "We need grub, Buckshot. We ride weeth you, Lawrence."

"Smart boy, Mex."

Tortilla Joe mounted and left a stirrup free. Buck's boot toe found it and his rangy body lifted to settle behind the cantle. The cavalcade loped south, sand and dust lifting into the wind.

Tortilla Joe's bronc was fresh. He and Buck had loafed along. They had been heading for Yuma, to the southwest. There they intended to punch cows for a rancher named Gallatin, whose Circle Arrow spread was on the Gila River. They had spent the summer in upper Colorado, punching cows for old Sam Perry.

Old Sam had said when they were leaving, "Drifting south, boys?"

Buck had nodded. "Weather fits a man's clothes down there come winter."

Old Sam had counted out gold pieces. Arthritis had made his fingers claws. "When you cross the Dee-vide," he'd said, "you come into the Salt River Desert. Swing into Buckskin town and give my hello to my only boy, Jack. Jack is developing some desert land down there—been there eight years. Long time not to see a man's only offspring."

"We'll do that, Sam," Buck had promised.

"Aim to have the cook write Jack today. Tell him you two are coming."

EVIDENTLY the letter had reached Buckskin ahead of them. And, somewhere along the line, somebody had given out false information, or had read something into the letter. For Lawrence had said that Jack Perry had claimed Tortilla Joe and Buck McKee were riding in to side him.

Which, in Buck's estimation, was not good.

If they hanged Jack, it would break Old Sam's big heart. Impatience gnawed at Buck. He spoke to Lawrence.

"Our bronc can outrun your pinto, can step away from any horse in this bunch, even if we are riding double," he declared.

Lawrence fell. "Got any dinero?"

The man screamed, came out like an uncoiling spring

"Twenty bucks."

"Chicken feed. But a deal. Ride, scissorsbills, ride!"

Ponies running, they roared toward Buckskin. Tortilla Joe let his fresh horse run. Behind them, Curt Lawrence and his gunmen rode hard. The sun was hot as it slipped down behind igneous peaks and the tough ride in pursuit of Claire McCullen had winded the Hammerhead broncs. Despite his double load, Tortilla Joe's horse kept the lead.

Three miles into Buckskin. A sun-whipped burg, sitting on a small rise. Sagebrush, mesquite, junipers. A few scrub cedars with their pungent aromas. Giant *saguaro* cacti lifted spiny hands. An ugly town, a harsh background.

As they entered town, a dog leaped out for Tortilla's bronc. Hammerhead gunmen rode him down. Buck heard him yip. Ahead was a crowd. Mexicans, kids, cowpunchers, women. Grouped before a long, adobe building.

But it was not the crowd, or the building, that held Buck's attention.

Tortilla Joe reined in, eyes wide. Automatically the Latin's free hand rose and made the sign of the cross.

Curt Lawrence, pinto laboring for breath, said, "You win, McKee. Here's your twenty bucks."

Buck slapped the gold piece to the earth.

Rage flamed in Lawrence's face. Buck paid the cowman no attention. All he could see was the adobe building, built in best Spanish style, with jutting ceiling-joists, and that from one of these joists hung a man! The wind turned his body, showing his bound hands. His shadow danced on dust, his body hung limply.

Back in a dirty alley a hound lifted his nose and howled toward the blue bowl of the Arizona sky.

Buck shivered.

CHAPTER II

Wild Woman

SCUFFED boots were hooked around the brass rail. One a Hyer; the other a Justin. Worn boots, runover heels.

"Tequila," Tortilla Joe told the barkeeper.

The fat whiteaprons swiveled his head on its oak-tree neck and looked at Buck who said, "Whisky. Straight."

The bartender lumbered toward the back-bar. He moved with the agility of a sick Hereford bull with blackleg. His pudgy hand went out and speared two bottles. These he spun down the bar. The tequila bottle stopped in front of Tortilla Joe. The whisky bottle stopped in front of Buck.

"Ees a expert, no?" commented the Mexican.

"An old trick, Tortilla," Buck shrugged.

Two glasses slid down the bar, stopped in front of them. Then Thick Neck put his wide back against the back-bar rim, yawned, and closed his eyes. He looked very weary, and also very deceptive. His eyes were closed—but how about his ears?

"Talk Mex," Buck told his partner.

"Maybe he understand, no?"

Thick Neck snarled, "Hell, I'm not listening to two damn fools!"

Buck said, "Thanks, pard."

Tortilla Joe swore at Thick Neck in Mexican. The man stared at him uncomprehendingly. The Mexican added choice curse words—fighting words. Thick Neck smiled, then scowled; he was plainly puzzled.

Tortilla Joe said in Spanish, "He doesn't understand, Buck. Now let's talk, no?"

"Yes."

Buck drank. The whisky was a combination of liquid fire and carbolic acid. Tortilla Joe drank.

"Tough drink," the Mexican said.

"Tough setup here, too," Buck reminded.

"Be rough on old Sam Perry. Hees only son."

Buck turned his glass. It made damp rings on the bar. "Lawrence don't like us. Reckon he still thinks we're gunmen sent to side Jack Perry. Anyhow, he just don't cotton to us."

"That Claire McCullen—she is the beauty, no?"

"A female horsethief. A town of lynchers. But I got to wait until she comes back to town. Got to get my horse."

"She breeng men from Cinchring Construction. There'll be a big fight. Lawrence has gunmen stationed all around town."

"I can't help but think of old Sam," Buck said mournfully. "He'll walk on his chin in sorrow. Fine old man. We got to notify him."

"We send him a letter."

"You have to write it."

"Me, I cannot write, Buckshot."

"You two big fools," said Thick Neck, in Spanish, "might suddenly find yourself full of lead."

They looked at the bartender. He looked at them. His eyes were sad. They were the eyes of a man who was saying good-by to a friend right before that friend climbed the steps to the gallows.

"Poor man," Buck murmured.

"You ain't got nothing to keep you in Buckskin," Thick Neck said. "You can get your bronc, when it comes back, and you can—"

Buck paid him no attention.

Tortilla Joe paid him no attention.

Their attention—and their full and rapt and admiring attention—was on the woman who had sidled in between them.

She was small. Not over five feet. She was young. She was built right in the correct places. Red hair, glistening, gleaming; green eyes, bright, sharp. Her buckskin blouse showed a nice rising contour. Buckskin riding skirt hugged full thighs. Buck didn't look at her boots.

Buck said drily, "Miss, we ain't been introduced, have we?"

"We want the introduct," Tortilla Joe said.

From where he stood Tortilla Joe's eyes could make out the V of her breasts. His eyes didn't move.

"I'm not a miss, gentlemen." She had a creamy, caramel voice. "I'm Mrs. Curt Lawrence."

"The lucky stiff," Buck said.

"Maybe he isn't lucky. The given name is Sybil. Call me that." Her eyes were on Buck. "You're McKee." The eyes went to the Mexican. "And you're Tortilla Joe something or other."

"Correct."

She looked back at Buck. "Where are your manners, sonny?"

"What you drinking?"

SHE ordered whisky. She drank it straight. As she lifted her glass, two big diamonds gleamed in rings. She moved so Tortilla could not see the V. He saw more than the V.

Buck said, "You're a runt. Lawrence is a giant. Never the train shall meet, or something smart like that."

"He's big," she admitted. "And big across the pants, too. Somebody should take him down a size or two. His hat don't fit." She looked at Thick Neck. "Wipe the tears out of your eyes. Pour me a double shot this time."

She drank.

Buck said, "Steam came out your mouth, Sybil."

"Out my ears, too."

Tortilla Joe murmured, "Lovely ears."

"You," said Sybil, "are not looking at my ears!"

Buck laughed. She laughed. Tortilla Joe went red. He choked on his tequila and sprayed like a bull walrus coming up for air. But under Buck's laughter was a note of conjecture. What kind of a wife did Curt Lawrence have, anyway? In a saloon—and drinking with strangers that Lawrence hated, at that.

"If I had a wife I'd be damned if I'd let her hang around saloons," Buck said.

"Aren't you married?" Sybil Lawrence's green eyes appraised him. "Wonder what kind of a lover you'd make?"

"Try me," Buck challenged.

She said, "Let's drop the distasteful subject of matrimony. To put it bluntly, you two saddle-warts are up to your stetsons in trouble."

Buck glanced at Tortilla Joe. The Mexican's eyes were expressionless. This was leading up to what?

"Explain yourself, Sybil," murmured Buck.

"With pleasure. One, my husband is ornery. Two, you kept him from catching the heifer. You slapped good money out of his hand."

"Blood money," Buck corrected.

"Maybe so. Then there is Jack Perry."

Buck glanced out the window. Lawrence gunhands moved back and forth outside, getting positions. This town was a powder cache—and a big one. Somebody would soon drop the match. There was a lot here, a whale of a lot, he did not understand. For instance, Claire McCullen had said she was heading for the Cinchring camp for gunmen. What was the Cinchring camp?

Tortilla Joe explained. "We never meet Jack Perry alive."

"Jack spread word around you two were gunmen his dad in Colorado was sending down to help him."

"Help him do what?" Buck wanted to know.

"Help him fight the Lawrence spread."

Buck shrugged. "News to us. We're just common, everyday citizens—taxpayers and home-lovers, if we had a home to love or taxes to pay. Last summer we rode for Jack's dad. He asked us to stop by

here and say hello to his son. Which we aimed to do, but the son couldn't speak back to us."

Tortilla Joe asked, "Cinchring Camp? What she ees?"

"Jack Perry has a crew out on Cinchring Creek, northeast of here," Sybil said. "He was building a dam on Hammerhead range. That gal that run into you—she's the local dressmaker. Some claim she and Jack were engaged."

Buck remembered Claire McCullen's pretty thighs. "Too bad Jack got hung," he said. "He missed something."

"What do you two ugly sons of Satan aim to do here in Buckskin?"

Buck glanced at Tortilla Joe. "Sent by her husband to pry information out of us," he told his partner in Spanish.

"A female spy, Buckshot."

Sybil Lawrence said, "A couple of damn fools, both of you." She looked at Thick Neck. "This damn hooch of yours must have a dead jack-rabbit in it. It tastes like it's furry." She spoke again to Buck McKee. "I'm only warning you for your own good. My husband is out to hang your hides on the fence if you stick around town. He's mean and he's—"

A harsh voice came from the doorway. "Sybil, get the hell out of here—pronto!"

Curt Lawrence stood in the batwings. His craggy face was mean, his lips wry with anger. His cold eyes touched Tortilla Joe, then swung to Buck.

Buck said, "We ain't leading her astray, big gun."

CURT LAWRENCE came forward, spurs making loud noises. Behind him through the doorway came two gunmen, evidently his bodyguards. One big hand went out, found his wife's shoulder. He twisted her and flung her backward, and one of the guards caught her.

Buck hit him. He drove in a solid, tough right. It caught Lawrence on the jaw, lifted his head, and drove him backward. The left came in and dropped the Hammerhead man. It happened that fast, and with cold conciseness.

Lawrence sat on the sawdust, groggy.

Buck looked hurriedly at the gunmen. One still held Sybil, who was cursing her husband, and the other was on the floor, knocked cold—and not by Buck or Tortilla Joe.

Tortilla Joe murmured. "My gon—she ees out of holster, Buckshot."

Buck hardly heard his partner's low words. He was staring at the man who had come in behind the Hammerhead gunman and knocked him cold. This man was short, a skinny, dried-up hunk of sin. Greasy buckskins covered skinny legs. Moccasins, beaded, dirty, were on his feet, and he was naked above the waist, showing a scrawny brown chest. His head was huge, his stringy hair was held by a buckskin thong, and in his hand he carried an Indian war club.

Buck thought, A sideshow freak, eh?

He said, "Thanks, friend."

The skinny man blew on his club. "Don't mention it, McKee. It was a pleasure. I'm editor of the local newspaper, the *Cactus*. For some time I have wanted to knock this son of hell cold. His name is Will March. When he comes to, he will undoubtedly reach for his gun in an attempt to kill me." The thin lips formed a sigh. "A cruel, bestial world, Mr. McKee."

"You—an editor?" exclaimed Buck.

"Yes, of the local sheet, as I said. The name, sir, is Sitting Bull Jones. One of the Jones boys, no less. Scouted for General Miles against Sitting Bull up in Montana, therefore the nom-de-plume." He gestured toward Curt Lawrence. "His Royal Nibs, the Crown Prince of Buckskin Range, evidently wants to say a few words, although it is easily apparent, even to my untutored eyes, that he has difficulty in working his jaw."

"He should not manhandle a woman," Tortilla Joe said sadly.

Curt Lawrence was getting to his feet. "She's your wife, friend," Buck growled, "but she's still a woman, even if she is married to a lobo like you."

Lawrence looked at Buck. In his quiet glance was raw, livid danger. He glanced at Tortilla Joe's drawn .45. He looked at the fallen gunhand. He walked over and

kicked the unconscious man in the face. Two teeth skidded across the sawdust. Sitting Bull Jones made threatening gestures with his Sioux war club.

"Bad boy," the editor said. "Kick sonny when he is down and out cold."

Lawrence spoke to the gunman who still held his wife. She had just slapped the fellow hard across the face. Her hand had left a vivid mark against his unshaven tan.

"Let go of her," Lawrence ordered.

The gunman gladly released Sybil Lawrence. He wiped his nose. Her fingernails had torn hide off the bridge of it.

"With pleasure, Boss," he muttered.

"When your pardner there comes to," Lawrence said, "tell him to get to hell out of Buckskin and stay off Hammerhead range or I'll kill him!"

"I'll do that, Boss."

Lawrence's pale eyes clashed with the green eyes of his wife. "You've had your little playday. Are you ready to leave now?"

"You can't run me off!" she defied him.

"I can paddle your rump. I've done it before, you know."

Sybil looked at Buck. "Thanks for slugging the ugly dog." She turned, her buckskin riding-skirt swishing. She left, and Buck liked the lilt of her hips. Sitting Bull Jones, though, kept watching Lawrence, who spoke to him.

"You and me ain't done, fellow."

"I judged that," the editor said.

Lawrence said to his gunman, "Get out of here," and the gunman obediently left.

Lawrence followed him. He was in the doorway when Buck said quietly, "What, no threats, Lawrence?"

Lawrence stopped. His pale eyes probed Buck's steady ones. They stood there, and tension was in the air. Behind the bar, Thick Neck stood rooted to the floor, eyes wide. Sitting Bull Jones fingered his war club. Tortilla Joe, seemingly at ease, held his .45 negligently, barrel pointing toward the sawdust floor. Still Lawrence looked at Buck, and Buck looked at the owner of the big Hammerhead spread.

Hate was in Lawrence's staring eyes. Buck matched them, stare for stare.

Lawrence said, "You know the danger you are in. Only a fool makes threats, McKee."

"Only a fool," Buck said.

CHAPTER III

Rimfire Range

LAWRENCE went through the batwings, spurs clanking. They heard him move down the plank sidewalk outside, boots jarring old pine. He moved past the window—big, tough, purposeful. Then he was out of sight.

"Only a fool," Thick Neck repeated. And his voice held sarcasm.

Buck studied the heavy barkeeper. "You'll get me so I don't like you," he said. "You're working on my patience."

Thick Neck swallowed, moved out of reach. Evidently he was remembering the rapidity with which Buck had knocked Curt Lawrence down.

Sitting Bull said, "Here comes Claire McCullen riding into town."

With Buck in the lead, the three customers went outside. Claire McCullen had evidently ridden hard, for Buck's bronc was sweat-covered. She stepped down, sobbing.

"Those damned construction hands!" she cried. "They wouldn't believe me! They thought I was joshing them about Jack being in danger. Finally a man rode out and told them Jack had been lynched! They're talking it over now."

Buck asked, "They'd ride into guns, and they know it?"

"Yes, the cowards!"

"Wise men," Buck corrected. "Lawrence has the town spiked with guns. It would be deadly ambush." He made his voice hard. "Miss, you stole my bronc! They hang people for stealing horses, you know."

"I brought him back."

Buck grabbed her by the wrist. "Come along with me." He made his voice very

harsh. She did not see him wink at Tortilla Joe.

"Where—we—going?" she panted.

"To talk to the sheriff."

Meekly she let him lead her down the street to the headquarters of the local lawman.

A small log office. On a long table were various items—old Western story magazines, two law books, a rifle, and an old shotgun. Boots, shiny, new, polished, rested on the desk, spur rowels gouging a hole in the hardwood.

A stern voice asked, "What's all the commotion about?"

Buck said, "This gal stole my bronc."

"Let go of my arm!" Claire McCullen tried to jerk away. Buck held her forearm securely. "Let go of me!" she repeated furiously.

"You got a nice arm," Buck said.

The sheriff let his boots fall to the floor with a thud. He was a short man with a big belly and a bald head that glistened like a billiard ball with butter on it. He had a long handlebar mustache. He also had listless, watery eyes. Buck catalogued him as the species without backbone.

"She brought your horse back," the sheriff reminded.

"She took it without asking me for it," Buck reminded right back at him.

Claire had ceased struggling. Buck let his hand slide down and hold hers. He squeezed the hand. She studied him with cold indifference. She said, "You dirty louse! Only reason you are creating this scene is that you want to hold my hand!"

Buck said, "My, my what an imagination."

Tortilla Joe's eyes were roving around the room, studying this, looking at that. Finally the Mexican's sad doglike eyes settled on the pot-bellied sheriff. "What ees your name?"

"Sheriff Henry Potter. And you two are Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe. You want to file a complaint against this woman, McKee?"

"This woman!" Claire McCullen's voice was rimmed with anger. "Sheriff Potter, how dare you speak about me like—"

"Everything you say," Buck reminded, "can be held against you in court. Yep, Sheriff, I want to file a complaint."

Potter shook his bald head. "Refuse to issue a complaint. I got a headache, and I mean just that!"

"What from?" Buck wanted to know.

Potter's limps trembled in anger. "Mister, don't act dumb, for Gawd's sake! This peaceful hamlet has just been the scene of a lynching bee. I was slugged on the head and my prisoner was taken from me! And you stand there and ask what makes my head ache!"

Tortilla Joe moved over and looked at the sheriff's shiny head. "I see no marks of the club, or whatever you was heet weeth."

The sheriff studied him wickedly. "Mex, you doubting the law's word?"

"No, no, never that!"

"You're the law," Buck reminded. "I'm an honest citizen. I demand the right to make a complaint against this heifer!"

"*Heifer!*" Claire's voice held anger that bordered on hysteria. "Sheriff Potter, if you arrest me I—I'll—"

BUCK put his arm around her, grinning. He pulled her close. She was all curves, all softness, all woman. "She's getting violent. She might resist arrest."

"I'll handle her," the sheriff growled. "Come along girl."

She planted both boots on the floor, and the sheriff had almost to drag her into a cell. When he came back he was perspiring freely. He mopped his forehead with a dirty blue bandanna and regarded the partners with a tough scrutiny.

"You men are trouble," he finally said. "I should throw you in the juzgado, too."

"Why?" Buck asked innocently.

"For one thing, you slugged Curt Lawrence. Lawrence draws a lot of water here on this range. Then you created a scene in the saloon. Disturbing the peace, picking on a peaceful, law-abiding citizen."

"A taxpayer, too," Buck murmured. The derision in his voice made Sheriff Henry Potter's eyes narrow. Buck asked,

"Did Lawrence complain to you?"

"No." The sheriff shook his head. "The Hammerhead fights its own battles."

Buck said meaningly, "The Hammerhead also lynches its enemies, even taking them out of jail to do that."

"They slugged me," growled the lawman.

"Oh, yes," Buck said. "They slugged you. I forgot that."

"Listen, McKee." Potter leaned forward, fat body angled in swivel chair, eyes earnest and fatherly. "You're in trouble. You and this Tortilla Joe. You don't hit a man like Lawrence and live. You either move out—fast—or you stop breathing. Simple."

"I'll breathe," Buck assured him.

He signed the complaint. Claire McCullen would appear in the morning before the local justice of the peace for preliminary trial. Buck and Tortilla Joe went outside. Sunset had softened the day somewhat. It brought the sweet smell of blooming sage, of cactus flowers.

At the end of the street, out there on the desert, were the *saguaro* cacti—big and round and with upraised spiny arms. But Buck had no eyes for the desert.

Tortilla Joe said, "Why you put the girl in the jail, Buckshot?"

Buck smiled. "Just for the hell of it. I wanted to get my arm around her, and I did. Before this is over she'll kiss me of her own free will. You watch and see. Besides, she stole my bronc, remember?"

"You kees her! Hola, that ees the laugh! She cheecken mad, she ees—she slap your face, hard, too!"

"Want to bet?"

"I got twenty dollar to bet."

"Called."

Tortilla Joe quit smiling. "You sound too sure. The sheriff, he ees the easy one. Nobody slug him. No marks on hees bald head. He give young Perry up to the mob, because he Lawrence man."

Buck nodded. "We bunk here tonight," he said, "then pull up stakes in the morning. That'll leave nobody to testify against Claire and she'll go free."

"What about Jack Perry?"

"What about him? He's dead, hung, lynched."

"He son of ol' Sam Perry."

Sagebrush Sam Says:

Us cowfolks figure that true friendship, like a good old seasoned Western saddle, rides most comfortable if the cinch ain't pulled too tight.

Buck studied his partner. "Look, Tortilla, look. We punched cows for Sam Perry. We like him. He paid us wages. He liked us. Beyond that, is there anything that says we should get killed for him?"

"He our friend," Tortilla Joe insisted. "So is Sitting Bull Jones our friend, if you look at it like that. Hey, here's his print shop. Let's drop in and see him, eh?"

They turned into an adobe building through a sagging door.

Tortilla Joe said, "Then come daylight we leave, eh?" He looked around. "She ees dark een here. Why they no light the candles?"

"We got a bunch of shots through the windows the other night," Sitting Bull Jones said, "so we quit lighting the lamps."

By this time the eyes of McKee and Tortilla Joe had become accustomed to the gloomy interior. Over against the back wall another old-timer was laboriously running a hand press, all his weight going against the lever. The press was noisy—the heavy stamp lifted, hesitated, then fell on the unsuspecting sheet of paper. An

underfed Mexican boy, naked except for raged pants, fed the press. The old-timer was almost as homely as Sitting Bull Jones.

SITTING BULL had on a leather apron so long he almost tripped over it when he got up. He shook hands with great enthusiasm, as though he had not seen the partners for years and years. Then he shoved a newspaper under Buck's nose.

"Read that headline, McKee," he said triumphantly.

Buck read aloud to Tortilla Joe:

McKee Beats Hell
Out of Lawrence!
Knocks Him Down

Sitting Bull Jones chuckled like a squirrel who had found a shiny new walnut. His gopher-sharp eyes were on Buck's face.

"Good headline, eh, McKee?"

Buck laid the paper on the bench. "Curt Lawrence will hang your hide on the fence when that paper comes out."

"We print the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"Some men," philosophized Tortilla Joe, "they has been keeled for telling the truth, Seeting Bull." He looked at Buck. "Eef these papers they get on the street we had best leave town pronto, no?"

"Cowards?" Sitting Bull Jones asked. "Maybe you don't know, and it might come as a shock to your delicate constitutions, but Lawrence has orders out for his men not to let you leave Hammerhead range. When you dumped him into the sawdust in the saloon, McKee, you did more than hammer down his jaw. You hit him where it hurts the most, and that is in his pride."

Buck said, "We'll take the chance, Jones."

Sitting Bull Jones made a swipe against the air with his Sioux war club. The club whistled like a baseball bat slamming out a home run.

"You jugged Claire, eh? Good story. We want details, McKee."

The Mexican boy helper stared at them. The old gent running the press gawked at them. Apparently they were museum pieces. Hadn't Buck knocked down the Crown Prince?

"Try and get them," Buck said, turning to go.

"Hey, McKee!"

Buck stopped at the door. "What is it now?"

"Will March—the gent I knocked cold," Sitting Bull Jones said.

"What about March?"

"There's talk around. Lawrence dressed him down with his tongue. Gave March another chance. Everybody is talking about it!"

Buck looked at the man. "Where do I fit in, Sitting Bull?"

"March is out to get you, to square himself with his boss. He made that agreement with Lawrence. March is fast with a gun."

Buck considered. "Maybe it is just some more gossip," he finally said.

"Watch yourself, McKee."

Tortilla Joe spoke up. "Who keel Ol' John Lawrence? Jack Perry?"

Nobody knew for sure, the editor informed. The cattle king had been found shot dead out on the desert. Shot through with .30-30 bullets. The killing had occurred just south of the Cinchring Construction Camp. The sheriff and Curt Lawrence had found where the killer had ejected his spent cartridge-cases.

"Firing pin landed in a peculiar manner on them," the old editor supplied. "They took Jack Perry's Winchester and fired it a hundred times. Firing pin landed on its cartridge-cases just like the one that shot down Old John Lawrence."

"What did Perry say in defense?" Buck wanted to know.

"He claimed he had not shot the old gent. He claimed he had two Winchesters, both thirty-thirty caliber. One of them, he said, had been missing a few days. I talked a long time with him. He claimed somebody had stolen his rifle, shot Old John, then sneaked the Winchester back."

"Could be," Buck said. "If he didn't kill the cowman, who did?"

"Nobody knows, except the killer."

Buck and Tortilla Joe left. Outside, dusk hung to the dust; the rim of the scarp mountains held a band of fire as the sun set. Buck sort of hated to leave here, for he couldn't forget old Sam Perry. Suddenly he stopped. Tortilla Joe looked at him in surprise because he had stopped so abruptly. "You see sometheengs—back in the alley, Buckshot?"

Buck said, "A woman just sneaked through a door back there. That brick building, Tortilla—that's the one she went into. She went in fast, like she didn't want anybody to see her."

"Who was she?"

"Looked like Sybil Lawrence."

Tortilla Joe scowled. "That building, she ees the bank, no? Well, it make no deeference to us, so we go to get some chuck and then we leaves."

"Wait a minute! Why would she sneak in the back door?"

CHAPTER IV

Death Rides a Fast Pony

BUCK and Tortilla Joe went down the alley. Tin cans, garbage, and dust. Buck sidled close to a window. The blind was low. He squatted and squinted under the blind. Then he straightened, whistling.

"I look now," Tortilla Joe said.

When the Mexican straightened, he was smiling. "Meesus Lawrence, she een there. She kees heem, too."

"A long, long kiss."

The Mexican smiled. "The man, she not her husband, too. She another hombre, and she ees a good looker, no?"

"You mean *he*, not *she*. You get your pronouns twisted."

"Love," Tortilla said. "Great theeng, love. Now we go."

[*Turn page*]

Round-Up Pete Says

"The man who did more to arouse us workingmen was the inventor of the alarm clock."

AND THERE'S NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT TO WEAR A PAIR OF—

Carhartt Master Cloth Overalls

Bib overalls, Sanforized, with coats and work caps to match.

Lace back dungarees and waist overalls in long-wearing Carhartt Master Cloth blue denim.

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HAMILTON CARHARTT OVERALL CO.

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They were walking down the alley when, ahead of them, Buck caught the flash of a rising rifle. The man holding it was crouched behind a barrel used to hold refuse. A little light, coming through the space between two buildings, accidentally glinted on his rifle. And it was this flash that saved Buck's life.

With one sudden heave, he pushed Tortilla Joe. The Mexican grunted, "What een the hell!" and fell on his face. Already Buck was crouched. The rifleman shot first, but because of Buck's movement to one side, fast and smooth, he missed.

From where Buck hunkered came the mad red roar of his .45. The rifle talked again, and this time the slug lifted dust ahead of the prone Tortilla Joe, who had his .45 out.

The man screamed, the sound high above the roar. He came out like an uncoiling spring, threw his rifle from him, fell on his face.

Tortilla Joe said, "He try to ambush, no?"

THEY looked at the dead man. Buck remembered Sitting Bull Jones's grim prophecy. The editor had been correct. Lawrence had made a compromise with Will March.

Buck said, "I don't think we'll leave Buckskin for some time, Tortilla."

The Mexican's voice held a tough note. "Ambush," he repeated. "No, we stay, Buckshot."

Men converged on the alley. Sheriff Potter came puffing along in the rear.

Sheriff Potter's head glistened. "What happened, McKee?" he demanded.

Buck told him. The lawman looked at Tortilla Joe.

"That correct, feller?"

Buck asked, "You doubting my word, Sheriff?"

"I doubt everybody's words."

Buck said, "Nice gent."

He listened to Tortilla Joe explaining to Sheriff Potter. There was in Buck McKee a cold, tough anger. Had not that light flashed accidentally from Will March's rifle he would have been dead. Ambushed. And killed because Curt Lawrence had ordered his death.

He saw Sybil Lawrence in the crowd. About ten feet from her stood the man she had been kissing in the back room of the bank. Buck gave the man a little attention now that he was in clearer light. He saw a well-built man of about thirty, well-dressed and neat; evidently a man who shied away from physical labor. Still, he toted a six-shooter, Buck was quick to note.

Somebody said, "Here comes Curt Lawrence."

The crowd split and let the Crown Prince of Hammerhead range through. Behind Lawrence came only one gunman now—the gent who had jerked Sybil Lawrence to her feet after her husband had flung her from the bar. He was scowling and Lawrence was scowling.

Buck watched the cowman's big, impassive face as Lawrence looked down at the dead man. Tension was now something tangible in the crowd. Lawrence looked at Sheriff Potter, seemingly ignoring Buck and Tortilla Joe.

"What happened to him, Potter?"

Potter told him.

Sitting Bull Jones, notebook in hand, was studying the corpse, taking down notes. He squinted at March's wounds.

"You sling a good gun, McKee," he commented.

Now Curt Lawrence turned and looked at Buck McKee. For a long moment they studied each other. And when Lawrence spoke he was obviously keeping his voice under strict and orderly control. Seemingly he spoke both to Buck and the sheriff.

"When we had the ruckus in the saloon McKee didn't cross Will March. Sitting Bull here was the one who laid him cold. I was the one who kicked out Will's front teeth. Now why then would he tie into you, McKee? Had you know him before and had trouble with him on another range?"

"You talk like an idiot, Lawrence!" Buck never took his eyes from the Hammerhead man.

LAWRENCE kept his face blank. But Buck, sensing what lay behind the bland features, figured it took effort.

"Explain yourself, McKee," Lawrence growled.

"It's common knowledge, all over town—you made a deal with Will March to get me. March pulled down good wages from you as a gunman. You gave him a chance to get back in your favor."

"Can you prove that?"

Buck moved toward the cowman, who retreated not an inch. Sheriff Henry Potter put his fat belly between them. Sweat was on his naked skull.

"Men, no fighting, savvy!"

Lawrence did not play with the gold nugget now. His hands were down, thumbs hooked in his gunbelt ahead of his guns. And his face was still deadpan, still without expression.

"Can you prove that, McKee?" he repeated.

Sitting Bull Jones said, "I heard about it. I told McKee. Everybody in town knows about it. The swamper down at the saloon heard the talk and he blabbed like an old woman."

"Still no evidence," Curt Lawrence said shortly.

Buck held his anger in check. He stepped back, said, "Self-defense is plain enough. He pulled against me and I killed him."

Another man said, "No fighting, men, please. This range has had enough trouble as it is."

Buck looked at the speaker. He was the man whom Sybil Lawrence had kissed. Buck asked, "And who are you?"

"I'm the banker, Martin Halloway. But that is neither here nor there. Lawrence, I'd like to talk to you in my office. Your wife, too. Come along, Curt, and let this ride."

Lawrence eyed Buck. Grudgingly he said, "All right, Martin." But Buck figured that in the cowman's voice was a touch of relief. Or was he wrong?

Lawrence and his wife walked away. Banker Halloway paused a moment to devote all his attention to Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe.

"You boys have been here in Buckskin for only a few hours, and already you've killed a man. You've been in trouble up to your necks ever since you came to town. Why not pull out and leave peaceful folks alone?"

Buck snorted. "Peaceful folks! Damn, you people sure are a peaceful tribe! If you're so damned peaceful how come you lynch a man in broad daylight without even wearing masks?"

The banker lost a little color. Whether from anger or surprise, Buck did not know. Still, he felt that under the surface this man, despite the seemingly easy exterior of a money-man, was hard and tough and brawny. Buck stored the impression in a mental file, marked the man powerful and, because of his power and position, dangerous.

"We'll find out who slugged Potter," the banker said. "And when we do, the guilty party will pay. Just as we'll dig down and find out who was behind this lynching. Those parties will pay, too."

"You saw them, didn't you? They were unmasked, they tell me."

"We'll find them."

Sitting Bull Jones's voice cut in, "You'll find them!" In that voice was scorn. "You will like hell, Banker Halloway. If you did, you'd have to arrest yourself. You were in that lynch mob!"

"I only stood and watched!"

"You did more than that," Sitting Bull accused. "You put the rope over the joist. You helped tie the knot and—"

Banker Martin Halloway started toward the grotesquely dressed editor. But Sitting Bull Jones did not retreat. His war club came up and became a menacing implement of death. Mr. Money-bags stopped.

"I got to put a new spike in this war club, the old editor complained, seemingly talking to himself. "Old one is kind of blunt. A new one could hit you alongside the head, Shylock, and rip open your skull. But as far as that is concerned, the old spikes could do the same, I reckon."

Buck smiled. Tortilla Joe chuckled.

CURT LAWRENCE and Sybil Lawrence had stopped, waiting for Halloway, and heard all that was being said. It was plain to Buck that Lawrence wanted to get into the argument again. His wife, though, held him by the sleeve and talked to him in a quiet voice. Buck thought, She's a crafty gal, that Sybil.

"Go run some ads through your old press," the banker growled. "I can't waste my time arguing with a broken-down old horse like you." He looked at Buck and Tortilla Joe again. "Hope you boys heed my advice."

"We might," Buck answered. "And we might not."

"If you've got any sense you will."

Buck shrugged. "Plumb brainless, both of us. Went to sleep in the shade over in Mexico and a goat came along and ate our brains."

"He chew them all out," Tortilla Joe said.

The banker said, "A couple of gun-handling idiots," and walked away, pompous with importance.

Somebody laughed and the banker looked suddenly at the man. His eyes held anger and hate. The man stopped laughing.

Buck saw then that the man was crippled in one leg.

"Don't laugh at Money Bags," Buck said to him, "or we won't renew your mortgage, feller."

Others laughed then. The cripple spat. Whether he meant to hit the banker or not was a matter of conjecture. But the spittle did hit Halloway on the hand. Fists clenched, he started toward the cripple, who stepped back and fell down. The next moment Halloway found himself sitting on the ground.

Through blurred eyes, he looked up at Buck McKee.

Buck said, "Don't hit cripples or kids or women, hombre. Ain't in the book."

Halloway spat blood. Gingerly he got to his feet. He shook his head, holding his jaw.

"You hit fast, McKee. Maybe too fast." He spoke sharply to Sheriff Henry Potter. "Arrest McKee."

"Why?" Potter asked innocently.

"Assault and battery, of course. You fat pelican, you saw him hit me!"

Sheriff Henry Potter shook his head. "You're wrong there, Halloway. I had my back toward you. When I looked around I saw you'd stumbled over that rock and had fell down."

"Stumbled over a rock! McKee hit me!"

Potter looked at Buck with sad eyes. He winked with the eye the banker could not see. "Did you hit him, McKee?"

Buck grinned. "Hell, no. He stumbled over this rock." He kicked at a pebble about the size of a peach stone. "Bumped his jaw on his knee as he fell." Buck appealed to the crippled man. "You saw it, didn't you?"

"He stumbled and fell," the cripple said hurriedly.

The banker said not another word. He turned and joined the Lawrences. He was outnumbered and they had outlied him. Evidently he was a man of logic. There were too many of them against him.

"Me, I don't cotton to him too much," Sheriff Potter mumbled, so only Buck could hear. "Too many ax-handles across the pants he is."

"I sort of judged you and him wasn't fast friends," Buck agreed. "How about this dead man?"

"I'm going home and put some new spikes in my war club." Sitting Bull Jones, club over his shoulder, left the group.

Sheriff Henry Potter wiped his bald and moist head with a cream-colored silk handkerchief that made a rustle as it wiped his smooth dome. By the edicts of the law, he stressed, he would have to hold a coroner's inquest over the carcass, and he set it for two days ahead—if the body was still preserved by that time. A man nearby said he would shoot the veins full of alcohol and preserve the carcass. Buck shuddered, said good-by, and left, Tortilla Joe trailing him.

They went into the Greasy Plate Café. They ordered. The waitress, a dark-haired girl, said nothing to them. Some young boys came along, pressed their

faces flatly against the windows, and admired Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe. The waitress shooed them away.

"I just washed that window today," she did say then. "Now they've got it greasy with their faces. But you boys are really heroes in this burg."

"Sometimes heroes they get keeled," Tortilla Joe said. "You make me some tortillas, no?"

"Yes, I will."

She went to the kitchen, leaving the partners alone. Tortilla Joe spoke around a mouthful of bread. "Something she ees rotten in the Arizona Territory, Buck. Sybeel, she kees theese banker, yet the banker he ees the friend of her husband. And Potter, he cannot be pushed around, no?"

"Only when he wants to be."

"You explain, please?"

Buck explained. Potter, he said, had not been slugged when young Jack Perry had been delivered out of the local jail into the hands of a mad lynch mob. That made Potter disloyal to the badge he toted. What if he had just now gone against the banker? That was only because, evidently, the two had a grudge between them.

"*Si.* Ees correcto."

CHAPTER V

The Man From Cinchring Camp

THE tortillas came. More kids came. The waitress chased them away. She was hot, vexed, and irritable. She kept brushing stray hair out of her eyes. Buck picked stray hair out of his soup. Matrimony, he thought suddenly, must be a hell of a mess. Good for feeble-minded men and women. No wonder the human race was going down hill so fast. Only the loco ones got married.

Then he remembered Claire McCullen. Dark, small, lovely—lovely even when her dark eyes flashed angrily. Maybe he was all wrong about matrimony.

Slow up, Buck McKee, slow down! Your shoulders weren't made for a collar and tugs. You're no jackass.

"I wish," the waitress said, "that if you two aim to stay in Buckskin, you'd eat some place else. I lose money on you, counting time spent in washing the front windows."

"Nobody he wants us in Buckskeen," Tortilla Joe lamented, in mock sorrow.

Sheriff Henry Potter came in and slid his ample bottom on the stool next to Buck. He said "hello" to the waitress, then looked at Buck. "What about the girl?" he asked.

Buck played ignorant. "What girl?"

"McCullen. Claire McCullen."

Buck stood up, reaching for a toothpick. He said, "It's this way, Sheriff. If she'd kiss me of her own free will, I'd drop the charge against her."

Potter's piggish eyes watched him. "Are you loco?" he asked, voice showing his wonderment. "Or joking with me?"

"No joking." Buck kept his face straight.

"Well, I'll be— Of all the damned—"

Then, from the doorway, came a harsh voice that swung them both around. The man standing there said, "Mister, are you Buck McKee?"

Warily Buck slid off the stool. He faced the man, crouched, ready. For the voice had been tough and menacing as well as harsh. Buck's first thought was that here was another Lawrence killer. His second was that this man was a giant—a human moose.

He stood about six-six, his torso was the thickness of a huge oak tree trunk, and his long arms dangled down around his knees. His huge face was covered with black whiskers, and his eyes were the eyes of a horse—solid in moist sockets.

Buck glanced at Tortilla Joe.

His partner also was on his feet, hand hooked over his holstered gun. Sheriff Henry Potter, though, seemed unconcerned. He pushed his fork against his piece of pie, watching the giant.

Buck said, "I'm McKee. What do you want?"

The man's voice boomed again. It sounded like somebody calling down a rain barrel—an echoing, booming sound.

"I'm Fiddlefoot Garner," he said. "Boss of Cinchring Construction. Worked for Jack Perry. Rode into town to scout around because some of the boys are plumb hot under the collar about Jack being lynched."

Buck let the tension run out of him. He slid back on the stol. "You scared me spitless," he said. "Sit down, Fiddlefoot, and tie into a piece of pie."

Fiddlefoot Garner did not walk. He ambled. He slid onto a stool and the waitress slid out a V of pie, not even asking what kind he wanted. His fork became lost in an enormous hand, then made a dip into apple pie. He spoke around a mouthful, juice running out the corner of his enormous mouth.

"Jack Perry said you two fellers was coming. His dad wrote that two gunslingers were on the way south to help him—coming from Colorado."

"Not gunslingers!" Buck almost groaned. "Somebody got it all wrong. It must have been Jack. I'm damned sure old Sam Perry wouldn't say any such thing about me and Tortilla Joe."

"Well, we boys wants you two to lead us," Fiddlefoot said.

Buck had no reply. Tortilla Joe's white teeth crunched noisily on a tortilla. Sheriff Henry Potter's mouth became an open cavity.

"This might mean war," the sheriff said in a hollow tone.

"The boys only need a leader," Fiddlefoot Garner declared. "They need two gunslingers."

Ouch, there it was again! Gunslingers!

Outside, a newsboy yelled, "Read all about it! McKee beats hell out of Lawrence! Perry lynched!"

The waitress called, "Come inside, Pancho!"

They all bought newspapers. Buck winced again as he reread the headlines. Sitting Bull Jones was not endearing a gent named Buck McKee to a gent named Curt Lawrence. Nor was he boosting the stock of an hombre called Tortilla Joe in the court of the Crown Prince!

BESIDES that, he was surely getting in bad with the Hammerhead outfit himself. Well, it was his skinny neck. Buck had all he could do to take care of his own collar-line. The old printer had a lot of courage to print such a newspaper. Evidently, too, he was on the side of Cinchring Construction.

"Brave old rooster!" Fiddlefoot boomed.

Sheriff Potter said. "A brave man can be killed as easy with a bullet as a coward can." With this bit of philosophy he stood up, paid for his pie, and left, saying, "The girl was asking about you, McKee."

"I'll drop in and see her."

The door closed behind the fat lawman. Fiddlefoot speared his pie, lifted about a third of it, deposited it in his open mouth. He did some talking. The Cinchring Camp crew, he explained, consisted for the main part of farmers who had proved-up on desert homesteads, who worked together with fresnoes and scrapers to build ditches to bring irrigation water from Salt River.

"Got a dam in the river?" Buck asked.

"Building one there now," Fiddlefoot said. He worked up his plate and looked at the waitress. "No use asking for more, because my credit ain't no good, is it?"

The waitress's dark head moved in negation. "No good."

Buck said, "On me, waitress. A whole pie for him."

"He'll get colic."

Sitting Bull Jones came in, chuckling and smiling widely. He looked like a contented cat who had missed getting the canary but had accidentally caught a big juicy blackbird.

"We got the scissorsbill on the run, McKee," he chortled. He held up his newspaper. "Look at that headline!"

"You might win," Buck said sourly, "and you might not."

"With two men like you and Tortilla Joe siding us? Two gunslammers?"

Buck winced. Tortilla Joe winced, too. Fiddlefoot Garner shoveled in the last fourth of the pie, chewed four times,

swallowed once.

Buck said, "Let's get out of here."

Sitting Bull Jones put his war club against the counter. "Drove a new spike in it," he observed. Left the head out about an inch. Where you going, McKee?"

"Cinchring Camp."

The editor's tan face paled slightly. He bobbed his head and the buckskin thong around his greasy hair fell down a little. He adjusted it. His hands were not too steady, Buck noticed.

"What about me, McKee? What if the Crown Prince ties into me when you are gone? I'll be alone against his gun—an old man, sick at heart, weak in body. Consider the aged, McKee, please!"

Buck had to smile. "What did you do before I came? You bucked the Hammerhead then and I wasn't around, remember?"

"But things have come to a climax since then."

Buck grunted, started past the printer who reached out, his ink-stained fingers a human claw, and grabbed Buck by the sleeve. His fingers fastened like eagle talons, twisting the cowpuncher's shirt.

"What if Lawrence notches me off? You'll avenge my death, McKee? Promise me that, friend? One little boon, one sterling friend to another?"

Fiddlefoot Garner snickered like a schoolgirl with a ticklish palm. Tortilla Joe grinned from ear to ear.

Buck said, off-handedly, "If Lawrence kills you we'll see you get a good send-off, Sitting Bull. But don't worry, my friend. Death comes to all men."

"Eef Lawrence he shoots you dead, we put the leely in your hand," Tortilla Joe said gravely.

They left the publisher with the bad-tempered waitress. Buck glanced back as he went out the door. Sitting Bull Jones had a sad face as long as a giraffe's. Buck grinned and followed Fiddlefoot Garner's wide back.

Fiddlefoot had driven a buckboard into town, a span of black geldings in the tugs. He had to get some supplies, he said, and the human ape ambled into the Mercantile. Buck and Tortilla Joe went toward the livery-barn for their broncs.

They could not be aware, of course, that Curt Lawrence watched them from behind the drawn blinds of the bank. The banker, Martin Halloway, seated at his desk, watched the cowman's wide back, wondering just where a bullet would do the most harm. Then he decided this was not the time or the place.

SYBIL LAWRENCE sat on the corner of his desk, one thigh hooked over the edge. The banker looked at her pretty knee. It was only a few feet away. He wanted to put out his hand and touch the knee. He'd had his hand on that knee before. He gave Curt Lawrence's wife a long, slow look—the look of a lover. She smiled. But had an outsider seen that smile, its brassy, forced edge would have been detected. Halloway, though, was in love, and love, they say, wears blinders. Therefore he did not see the forced pressure in her smile. He saw only the smile.

Curt Lawrence said, "Fiddlefoot came in for them, I'll bet. They're heading for the barn and their broncs. That old printer and his damned newspaper! I tell you, Sitting Bull Jones has to be got out of our way!"

"A bullet," Halloway said, still looking at Sybil's knee. "Just one little bullet in the right place."

"With no witnesses," Lawrence said.

"With no witnesses," the banker repeated.

Lawrence said, "I'll see you later," got up and went out the back door, leaving his wife alone with the banker. Both listened to his boots go down the alley and recede into nothing.

Inside the bank it was dim. Sybil swung her leg, the temptingly pretty knee. Halloway got to his feet and went around the desk. She looked up at him and his hand came down on her knee. His other hand brought her to her feet. She moved in close, putting emphasis on the correct spots, and they kissed long. With Hallo-

way, the gesture was ardent; with Sybil, it was necessary.

Halloway said, "We've got to get rid of him. We can do it now and blame it on McKee and the Mex. They're made to order for us, sweetheart."

"I have to own the Hammerhead," Curt Lawrence's wife said.

Halloway almost said, "You mean *we*, not *I*." He kissed her again and did not voice his thoughts. Sometimes this woman seemed too brassy. Sometimes when her mouth pulled down, and her eyes became a little stony, he got the impression she was a schemer. But she loved him. She had proved that.

"Where has he gone?" he asked.

She said, "I don't know, and I don't care. I hate the big blowhard. I could kill him myself. He's so dumb he's sure Jack Perry killed Old John. He'd swear to that."

"Good." Halloway paced the floor, hands locked behind his back. "But I do wonder where he's gone now."

CHAPTER VI

Dusty Skies

CURT LAWRENCE had gone to Thick Neck's saloon. There he had cornered his gunman, the one who had held Sybil Lawrence's hands behind her. He talked with him for some time. Then the gunman nodded, pulled his six-shooter around on his hip, and went into the darkness of the alley, heading for old Sitting Bull Jones's printshop.

Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe saw the gunman leave by the back door of the saloon. At that moment, Sitting Bull Jones left the cafe, heading toward his printshop. The killer saw the old printer. He flattened against a building, nearly hidden in the darkness, and this meant the man was out for no good.

Buck said, "You go through the alley, Tortilla."

"*Si*, Buckshot." The Mexican walked down the street alone.

By now the gunman had noticed Buck, who was moving forward toward him. But Sitting Bull Jones did not see the gunhand. The printer passed Buck, said, "Howdy again, McKee," and Buck nodded. Sitting Bull went on toward his newspaper office. The gunman watched Buck approach, and when Buck was near enough he saw the fellow's ugly, mean scowl. Tortilla Joe was nowhere in sight, but Buck knew his partner was in the alley.

The gunman studied him, anger scrawled across his loose, homely face. Buck stopped a dozen feet from him. For a moment they eyed each other—two circling mastiffs, with bullets for fangs.

Buck said, "Somebody went through my saddlebags down at the livery-barn." This was a lie, told only to rivet the man's attention on him. "They tell me you was snooping around down there. Did you search my bags?"

The gunman's narrowed eyes showed surprise. Then this died before the push of anger. His lips trembled, then tightened.

"McKee, you know damned well I never done no such a thing! You're just saying that to pick trouble!" Hand over his gun now, his eyes were bright pin-points of exploratory sharpness. He was so engrossed in Buck that he did not hear Tortilla Joe come behind him. The Mexican held a short club. It came down across the gunman's skull. The fellow's knees bent, and he fell on his face. One blow, and he was out cold.

Buck grinned. "He was a frosty one. Where did you get that manzanita club, amigo?"

"The *muchachos*, they ees play the baseballers, and thees ees their bat. He ees a good one, no? Maybe I break een that horsehide skull and keel heem, no?"

Buck said, "Makes no difference, does it?"

"No, not a bit."

They left the gunman lying there. Out on the sidewalk Buck met Curt Lawrence.

"One of your gunslammers is back there in the alley, cold," he told the cowman.

"Cold?"

"His horse might've kicked him."

Lawrence's eyes held a glittery hardness. He seemed to be doubting Buck's sanity. Buck wanted it that way; he smiled. His smile further bothered the Hammerhead cowman. Lawrence glanced at Tortilla Joe.

He saw a long, solemn face—hangdog, ugly, the face of a pessimist viewing life through dark glasses. No assurance in that homely mug. Just those patient, dark moist eyes watching him sadly.

Lawrence said, "Thanks," and left.

In a short time, after Buck had attended to a little personal matter, they were mounted, and they left, to—left town for Cinchring Camp.

They found the place not to prepossessing.

First, the dust.

Dust was everywhere—in the coffee, in the hotcakes the cook served up to them, in the air. The gritty, desert dust of Arizona; fine as silt, tough as steel. Dust arose behind the fresnoes. Dust came upward from the patient plodding hoofs of mules and horses. Dust coated the men's clothing, made masks of their faces.

Buck said, "Damn the dust."

"Damn the dust," Tortilla Joe said.

Buck glanced irritably at his partner. "Are you a parrot?"

The Mexican shrugged his thick shoulders. "You said, 'Damn the dust,' so Tortilla Joe, he damn the dust!"

Buck shoved half a hotcake into his gaping mouth. His teeth grated on dust; still he kept on chewing. He didn't like this dirt camp one bit. He was a saddleman, a gent born to a kak, and here he was, eating breakfast in a dirt-camp. And there was dust, dust, and more dust.

"We," he lamented, "are born for trouble, Tortilla Joe. Here we are, stuck with a bunch of sodbusters who are building an irrigation system, we're cueing the eight ball just because of a man we never saw."

"But we know ol' Sam Perry. Fine gent."

Buck nodded.

HE LOAFED around camp until noon. He was thinking of Claire McCullen most of the time. He was thinking about Claire too much, he realized.

Before he and Tortilla Joe had left Buckskin town the evening before Buck's chore had been to drop in at the jail and talk with Claire.

"McKee," she had demanded belligerently, "why the hell you keeping me behind bars?"

Buck had chided her gently. "A pretty girl shouldn't say 'hell,' Miss Claire. After all, you're the town millinery shop—"

"Not shop, you fool—just dressmaker.

AMERICA'S OLDEST PROFESSION

America's oldest profession is not what you think. It's the raising of livestock for meat, hides and tallow! Years before the first English settlement on the American continent, the Spaniards operated great cattle ranches in Mexico. As an example of the size of the ranches functioning before there were English people here, one rancher in the province of Jalisco, Mexico, was branding an average of 10,000 new calves a year. Such a spread would be a mighty big operation even today!

—*Manly E. David*

You talk like I was as big as a store."

Buck had admired her trim figure. But his grin had been satanic. "You stole my horse. Horse thieves have to pay, so they say. But I'll make a deal with you, honey."

Claire's dark eyes had been openly suspicious. Her nose had wrinkled. "If you're hinting at what I'm *thinking* you're thinking about, you're out of luck!" She had tried to slap him through the bars. He had grabbed her arm.

"Let—go—of—me!" she'd screamed at him.

Buck had hung on. She'd kept wriggling and trying to free her arm.

"What — is — this — deal?" she'd demanded.

"I'm going to kiss you, sister!"

"Not me, you're not!"

Buck had released her. "Wait and see, Claire." He'd grinned at her again. She was so angry her lips trembled. "Goodby, honey."

"Goodby, you—you—you—"

"You're stuttering," Buck had chided. "Not nice for a pretty girl to stutter. Try talking slower, please."

"You go *to* and stay put!"

Sheriff Henry Potter had come down the cell aisle, wiping his domelike head carefully. "Heard a ruckus back here," he said, and looked at Buck.

"She wanted to hug me and kiss me, but I stepped back."

"He lies!" Claire had flamed.

Ignoring her, Buck and the sheriff had gone into the office. Again Potter had mopped his shiny cranium, the lamplight reflecting from its glossy surface.

"For Gawd's sake, McKee, drop the charge against that good-looking heifer, please! My wife—man, she's the suspicious kind—claims I'm holding Claire because I want her close. Imagine that! A man my age."

"You're not so old," Buck had said easily."

Potter's chest had puffed. "And my oldest daughter—she won't talk to me even —McKee, you'll be in town tomorrow afternoon, sharp at two for the inquest?"

"Be there," Buck had promised.

Now, eating in the stifling hot tent, grinding sand between his molars, Buck was remembering Claire McCullen's angry face, and he smiled to himself. That was not overlooked, though, by Tortilla Joe.

"What she ees fonny, Buckshot?"

Buck got unhurriedly to his feet and carried his eating tools into the cook's part of the tent. "Fine saddle blankets, cook."

"You mean flapjacks."

"I mean saddle blankets!"

The partners went outside. Although it had been hot in the tent, it was even hotter outside. The sun smashed down on the desert. Mountains were dim in distant mirages. Out of the heat ambled Fiddlefoot Garner, hands dangling. He wiped his enormous face. He allowed, "Hot," and Buck allowed, "Hot," and Tortilla Joe said, *"Calor."*

"You want to look at the dam?" Fiddlefoot asked, eyes switching from man to man, just as though looking at the dam was the most important thing in the world.

Buck and Tortilla Joe inspected the dam. Buck didn't know a thing about dams, and, as he commented off-side to Tortilla Joe, he didn't give a damn about a dam. That morning the farmers had held a meeting, and had appointed Buck their leader. They all wanted to avenge Jack Perry's death. They were not a happy crew: Buck had been quick to sense that. They were morose, sullen, biding their time. But when it came it would be a showdown battle, Buck knew.

Jack Perry had really started something big. When this irrigation system was finished these farmers would have good irrigated farms on which they could raise many diversified crops. No wonder that Curt Lawrence was up in arms.

Fiddlefoot asked, "What are your orders, Boss?"

BUCK doubled the night-guard around the dam. He warned the guards to sit tight, keep guns handy, watch for trou-

ble. Then the farmers returned to their work—tight and tough and solemn.

Buck and his partner headed back for Buckskin.

"By the time we get to town, eet weel be time for the hearing for Señorita McCullen, no?"

"And the inquest into the gunman's death, too," agreed Buck.

"You are important hombre. You boss the farmers now. You keep the señorita een jail. You testify at gunman's inquest, *tambien?* Beeg gun, Buck McKee."

"Too much of a big gun."

Tortilla Joe said, "Womans, she ees ride toward us, Buckshot."

Sybil Lawrence sat her sadde like she was part of it. Small, lovely, sitting that silver-mounted saddle, her greenish eyes on them. Copperish hair showed from under her cream-colored Tom Watson stetson. Sunlight reflected from it.

"You have been out to the construction camp, I suppose?" she asked, as she reined up.

Buck nodded. "We're farmers now, Sybil. Dyed-in-the-wool sodmen, and we are forsaking our saddles."

"Tell that to somebody who believes you!"

"Don't go around that camp," Buck warned. "They'll pull your pretty legs off your pretty body. They'll jerk your arms out at the roots and beat you to death with them."

"Oooh, tough boys, eh?"

Buck yawned widely. "Well, we got to get to town. I got a woman there that needs some kissing."

"How about me?" Sybil said quickly.

Buck leaned forward. He eyed her flatly. She returned his gaze.

"Sister," he said, you've got a husband to kiss you— Just what is your game, Sybil?"

"Game?" she repeated, with wide-eyed innocence.

He leaned back, both hands on the horn; he looked at Tortilla Joe. The Mexican had dug a tortilla out of his saddlebag and was chewing it with magnificent deliberation. His face was a thousand years old. He winced as his teeth ground down on some sand. He threw the tortilla way.

"You've got a husband," Buck reminded again, his eyes hard on Curt Lawrence's wife. "He's got money and is a big man and you should be content with him." He added something just to get some information. "And you two have been married for years, they tell me."

"Somebody told you wrong, Buck. We've been married only a little over a year."

Buck said, "Forget it." He had learned something. Something new. Something that maybe had some bearing on this situation. "Some day, honey, I'll rassle you around, maybe."

The mood had left her. Her lips curled disdainfully, her green eyes became flecked, and a little muscle in her browned throat suddenly twitched.

"You won't wrestle me, you misbegotten son of a hunk of saddle leather! I just wanted to be neighborly. Look, you're in bad trouble, lined up with those farmers. You know my husband has hired gunmen. Is nothing serious to you—not even danger to your own neck?"

"Not even my own neck," Buck said, grinning now.

Tortilla Joe had his thumb in his mouth, digging at a tooth. "Me, I theenk I breaks the teeth, no? And when I theenk of them two good tooths that Lawrence kicked out of that gunman in the saloon—*hola,* how I weesh I had them tooths in my gums!" He looked at his thumb as though expecting to find his tooth impaled on it. "Ees there a dentist in Buckskins, señora?"

Sybil Lawrence's eyes now held a dazed look as if she doubted the sanity of both these riders. "There is no dentist," she snapped. "The blacksmith will pull your tooth— Don't say I didn't warn you, McKee!"

Buck yawned again. "Everybody has my welfare at heart."

She turned her horse and rode away, still part of her saddle. Buck watched her straight back until she was out of sight in a dry-wash.

"She ees theenk you are loco," murmured Tortilla Joe.

"I *am* crazy, Buck said.

Tortilla Joe turned his gross body in saddle and looked at the hills that now hid Sybil Lawrence. The hills lifted, became rocky and solid, and turned into the Salt River Mountains, scarped and sheer, black and ugly in the distance.

"Now why she ride eento them heels, Buck?"

"Always a question," Buck murmured. But Tortilla Joe noticed that his partner's eyes were narrowed. "A good question, though. Maybe out looking for Hammerhead cattle? Or to scout the construction camp for her loving spouse?"

"Them two—they not in love."

"Not like me and Claire McCullen, eh?"

"Hogwash!"

THEY jogged along. Buck was not worried one whit about the inquest. The gunman was dead, Lawrence had sicked him on. Dead men know no time, or pain. And as for Claire—let her worry a little. Buck grinned.

"There he ees come another rider, Buckshot," the Mexican informed.

The rider turned out to be no less a personage than the Crown Prince of the Hammerhead range. This time he sat a bay stud, a heavy, tough animal. He curbed the stud, making him walk on his hind legs, his spade bit brutal against the horse's jaws. And when the stud got his forefeet again on the ground the partners could see that the face of Curt Lawrence was bestial and angry.

"You gents see anything of my wife out here?" he demanded shortly.

Buck shook his head. He looked dumb. Lawrence glanced at Tortilla Joe. Again he saw a glum, hangdog face without thoughts or hope behind it.

"Only person we've seen since leaving the Cinchring Camp is you," Buck said. "And what a privilege it is to see the Crown Prince!"

"Don't get sarcastic, McKee!"

Buck eyed the cattleman. "Listen, mister, keep your levis on, savvy? You and your gang of cutthroats hung Jack Perry. You sent one of your gunslingers to get me. Luckily I outshot him. We slugged another one in the alley. We're up on you a little, ain't we, feller?"

"There's always another time," snapped Lawrence.

"Then make it now, and make tracks away from us!"

CHAPTER VII

Jail Elopement

FOR A MOMENT Buck McKee thought the Hammerhead owner would drag iron. Lawrence's face went as muddy as Salt River flood waters. Then suddenly sanity returned, wiping out Lawrence's blind anger. Two guns were against him, and he always wanted it odds in his favor.

He held his right hand high, even with his saddle-horn. Slowly it settled, but it rested on the wide Spanish saddle-horn, not on his holstered .45.

"Cinchring men, eh?" he snarled.

Buck nodded. "Farmers now. Plow walkers. Law-abiding citizens."

"Tax-payers, too!" Lawrence snarled again.

"Honest, law-abiding men," Buck said.

There was much beneath this apparent jesting, this release of emotion. Hate was there—hate on the part of Lawrence and hate on the part of Buck McKee. Buck remembered things—a man holding out a twenty-buck gold piece, and across it the shadow of a dead man hanging by his neck, the slow revolutions of the lynched man's body in the slow Arizona wind. He remembered a gunman hiding behind a refuse can in an alley, and he remembered the sudden flash of light on a rifle, then the gunman who had walked bent over, and had fallen. Lawrence had been behind all this, and Lawrence had tried to kill him, Buck McKee, too.

Buck said, "Ride, cowboy, ride!"

Lawrence cake-walked the stud around, and Lawrence was savage on the reins. Buck felt symathy for the bronc, for the cruel spade bit was gouging the horse's palate. Then Lawrence was loping away, heading south.

"Hees wife, she go north," Tortilla Joe observed.

Buck said, "She had a prettier back'n he's got, too."

Tortilla Joe spat at a scurrying lizard. "Meesed heem— She has been married to Lawrence but a few years, no? She ees een love weeth thees banker, an' hees name ees Marteen Halloway."

"How do you know she is?"

"Her eyes. Hees eyes. Hers, they no show much; hees, they light up like the kerosene lamps be behind them."

"I wonder—" Buck began musingly.

"You wonder what?"

Buck looked at his partner's dark and earnest face. "What say we rob a bank?"

"They put us in jail—eef they catches us. And money—we no need dinero, Buckshot. We got summer wages, and we got job for us down on Gila, when an' eef we ever get to the Circle Arrow spread of thees Gallatin."

Buck did some more talking. Curt Lawrence, he reminded his partner, was sure that Jack Perry had ambushed Old Jim Lawrence, Curt's father. Plainly Sybil Lawrence was making a fool out of the Crown Prince, and he, being deeply in love with her, was the only one who did not see this deception.

"Maybe she be married before, no?" suggested the Mexican.

"She's the marrying type. She could no more stay in bed alone than I could go out herding sheep."

"We rob bank then, no?"

"We'll see."

They jogged along. The sun was molten steel. Heat waves danced and a roadrunner, weary and hot from running ahead of their mounts, stopped in the shade of a *saguaro*. The long-billed desert bird stood with his wings out, his beak open. He did not run from them.

"His beak, he can cut a rattlesnake in two-weeth it," Tortilla Joe said, as he looked at the bird. "Hees beak she ees like the tin snips, no?"

Buck said nothing. They left the weary roadrunner behind. The sandy trail stretched across a dry wash thick with mesquite and catclaw. They saw a few head of Hammerhead cattle.

They were typical desert cattle—crosses between Texas longhorns and *cimarrones*, the native Arizona cattle. A farmer from Ohio would swear up and down and sidewise that a cow would starve to death on this desert. No grass, little water.

But Buck and Tortilla Joe knew different. These cattle watered, grazed away from water a day, and next day grazed back. And they lived off mesquite beans. They did not graze the way a cow grazes; they browsed, deerlike. They did not graze off the ground; they ate off the trees. Buck watched an old cow raise her head and strip mesquite beans off a thorny bush.

"Them cattles, they sure wild, "Tortilla Joe said. "Look at that cow she run, Buckshot! She sees us, turns like the deer, and *hola*—she ees gone through the brush. Somebody on horse he has been chaseeng her, no?"

"Looks that way, Tortilla."

"What does that mean to us?"

"Maybe nothing— Listen, I want to go into the Circle Arrow and get to work for Gallatin. We got to wind this up, notify Sam Perry, and— My Gawd, is that another rider, over on that rimrock butte?"

"Where he ees at?"

BUCK focused his field-glasses. He studied the rider, who was about four miles away. He had accidentally glimpsed the man because sunlight had reflected suddenly on some shiny part of his gear. He could not make out the man's features. Tortilla Joe also had his glasses on the man who rode out of sight in the rocks.

"That she look like the banker to me, Buckshot," the Mexican said.

"Me, too."

"Halloway, she look like."

Buck put his glasses back in their case. "Might be we was mistook," he said. "But he's riding in the same direction Sybil rode, looks to me like. What do you say?"

"He ride same way."

Buck frowned. "But why?"

Tortilla Joe let his wide shoulders fall. "I no know. We be late for the inquest. These sun, she hot."

They left the dry wash, climbed a small hummock, and there it was cooler, for the sun hung to the bottom of the wash with its thick brush and sagebrush.

And Buck McKee said, "Another rider, coming toward us. The sand is popular today."

The rider was really kicking up sand. He rode like the devil was pushing him with a red-hot fork. Dust streaked upward behind him as he sped across the sand washes, dodging *saguaros,* slipping past catclaw and mesquite.

"He try to keel hees bronc, no?"

Buck said, "That looks like Fiddlefoot Garner, don't it? He went into town right before we left the dam. Said he had some business there. By golly, that *is* Fiddlefoot!"

"He keel that horse. He weighs the ton, the horse ees small—"

Fiddlefoot Garner reached them and reined in, sand spewing upward. His huge face, streaked with sand and sweat, was wild and disorderly.

"McKee, that woman—she busted jail! Claire McCullen broke—"

Buck grinned. "What's so bad about that, Fiddlefoot?"

"The sheriff, he ran off with her! His wife—she's got a shotgun—she's after you, too. You had Claire jailed!"

"Potter ran off with Claire?"

"He sure did. Just a while ago they discovered it."

Buck didn't know whether to laugh or keep a straight face. But this was a serious matter to Fiddlefoot Garner. Buck looked at Tortilla Joe. Tortilla Joe looked at Buck McKee.

"Well I'll be the damned," the Mexican said slowly.

* * * * *

Buck McKee looked at the ceiling. It had recently been painted an egg-shell blue. Buck lay on a clean bed with a blue spread on it. Beside him lay Tortilla Joe, already dozing.

"Now why," Buck asked, "would a single woman want a big double bed like this one we've got our tired carcasses on?"

"Maybe she no be single every night," Tortilla Joe said sleepily. "First clean bed I been on since Gawd knows when. Me, I get sleepy, no?"

Buck looked around the room.

The walls had also recently been painted, light green. Easy on the eyes, Buck thought. A heavy rug was on the floor and the uncovered portions of the floor were shiny with wax. A dressing table against one wall, two chairs, a cedar chest and a trunk. And in the clothes closet were women's dresses—blue, yellow, every color. Buck also caught the scent of a delicate perfume.

"Sometimes, Tortilla," he said musingly, "I think a man should get married."

"Why?"

Buck had no answer to that. Outside he heard feet approaching on the gravel-sand. He listened, said, "Moccasins. None other than our friend, Sitting Bull Jones, war club and big mouth."

"He big blowoff."

The moccasins moved to the door, then stopped. There was a pause. Buck wet his lips and waited. Then a rap on the door. Buck said, "Come in, sweetheart," in a high falsetto voice he thought was feminine. There was another pause and he said, "Come in, lover boy. Hurry, so nobody sees you."

The door opened. Sitting Bull Jones, complete with war club, slipped inside, blinking his eyes at the sudden change of light. He blinked like a toad with sand in his eyes. Finally he quite blinking, his eyes focused. "Hell! McKee and Tortilla Joe. What became of the woman?"

"What woman?" Buck asked.

Tortilla Joe kept his head in the pillow. "No, no!" he moaned. "No, no!"

"The woman that invited me into this room."

Buck made his voice feminine again. "Hello, sweetheart."

SITTING BULL'S long face went red. He swung his war club, almost hitting a chair. "Female impersonator," he scolded. "Wondered why Miss McCullen would call me such names as I heard. We were always only friends.—Say, what are you two sheepherders doing there on her bed?"

"Waiting," Buck said.

"Waiting? For what?"

"I don't know." Buck appealed to Tortilla Joe. "What we waiting for, amigo?"

"Maybe death, no?"

Buck looked at Sitting Bull. "He's a nice character, if you don't know him." He studied the printer's short form. "What are *you* doing here, you ink-stained printer's devil? This is a woman's room, remember—the bedroom of Miss Claire McCullen, in her ask-no-questions rooming house in the town of Buckskin."

"I'm looking for Claire. I suppose you boys know she ran off with Sheriff Potter. Biggest scandal in years. Whole damn town is agog over it. Me, I'm running an extra—one page, five-column, big Mercantile ad on the back. I thought she might be in her room. Best place to hide, you know, is where everybody would think you ain't."

"Simple," Buck said. "Want to look under the bed?"

"I'll take your word for it. My legs are tired. You haven't asked me to sit down. No manners nowadays."

Buck said, "What do you know?"

Sitting Bull sat down. Against his chair he leaned his war club. "Polished the head of that railroad spike in my club," he observed. "Now when I swing it in the sun the sunlight shines off it like a mirror. Lets me know whether the spike is on the right side or not when I hit.—Say, something happened to that Lawrence gunman. You know about it?"

"What gunmens?" Tortilla Joe spoke from the depth of Claire McCullen's soft pillow. "We no know who you means, Seetting Bull Smith."

"Jones," the newspaperman corrected. "Yesterday when I leave the Greasy Plate, this Lawrence gundog—I think his name is Hawkins—he comes in behind me. I meet you boys and speak to you, remember?"

"I don't," Tortilla Joe lied.

Buck said, "Neither do I."

Sitting Bull Jones's sharp eyes moved from one to the other. "You boys have poor, poor memories. Well, I meet you two. First thing I know after that somebody tells me they find this Hawkins out cold, in the alley. Don't know what hit him. Said he was talking to you, McKee, and somebody dropped the Mercantile on him."

"Talking to me?" Buck essayed surprise. "Why, the man is loco! I never talked with him. We got our broncs and left town about then, eh, Tortilla?"

"We talk to nobody, Seeting Bull."

Again the publisher's gopher-eyes swept from one man to the other. Again that flaring element of doubt entered them.

"I'll bet your old mothers were glad when you two met," Sitting Bull Jones finally said. "Don't ever spoil your friendship by marriage."

"We won't," Buck assured.

Sitting Bull spat on the head of the spike. He got some fine sandpaper from his pocket and started polishing the spike-head.

"Thought maybe Claire had sneaked back to town for clothes and grub," he said, "so I might have a chance of catching her here for an interview. An exclusive interview. I don't believe she is in love with Potter. His head is too damned shiny. A bald man isn't a romantic figure." Sitting Bull Jones adjusted the buckskin thong that held his long hair in place. His fingers worked as he polished the spike-head.

"How long you been in Buckskin town?" Buck asked.

Sitting Bull kept on polishing. "Been here about four years. Stage-driver booted me off—no dinero. So I walked into the newspaper shop, and now I own it. Borrowed some dinero from the bank and

bought out the old owner."

"Borrowed from Martin Halloway, eh?"

"Not from Halloway. He wasn't banker then—sold to Halloway two years ago. Yep, two years ago this month. Halloway read Jessups' ad in the Tucson *Saguaro*."

Buck nodded. Somewhere, the threads were starting to weave themselves into a complete pattern, but the process was a slow one. He deliberately changed the subject.

"Sybil Lawrence sure has a nice little figure," he said. "Like to wrap my arms around her and hug."

This time Sitting Bull Jones looked up. His eyes had queer, hungry lights. "I've mighty often thought the same, McKee. She went to work in the Mercantile right after she got into town. The Crown Prince fell over his breeching over her and—presto! They were man and wife!"

CHAPTER VIII

Threads of Mystery

AGAIN, the loom started working, the threads moving into position. Then, without warning, the process stopped, needing more yarn.

Buck said, "So long, Sitting Bull."

"I'm not leaving yet," the editor said firmly. "I'm waiting here."

Buck spoke with emphasis. "By-by, Sitting Bull."

Sitting Bull Jones stood up and swung his club. "Got the right heft and feel," he said. "Like to try it out on the Crown Prince's rump. I'd hit him across them wide pants so hard—"

"Hit him across the head," Buck advised. "For the last time, good-by."

Sitting Bull shouldered his war club. "So long, you ornery old woman."

He went outside and Buck idly listened to the retreating crunch of his moccasins. He dozed off. He slept about two hours. Tortilla Joe slept, also—on his back, mouth wide open, nose vibrating with his snores. Buck slept on his back, mouth open. Only Buck didn't snore. Suddenly he came awake.

Somebody had entered the room. Now dusk was thick. Still, he made out the figure. He slid his .45 back under his pillow.

"Honey," he said.

The figure stopped, stared at the bed, seeing the occupants there for the first time. Evidently Tortilla Joe had hit a slack period in his snoring, or else he surely would have been heard.

"Who the hell—"

"McKee. Tortilla Joe."

Tortilla Joe sat up suddenly. "Where we at, no?" He gawked at the intruder. "A womans, she comes to see us."

Buck said, "Sit down, Miss McCullen. Take it easy, kid, and don't holler, because if you do, back to the clink you go. This town is as uneasy as a bull high-lifed and turpentined for the bull ring. One beller out of you and a dozen Buckskin citizens will come down on you like hail on a wheat field."

"What are you two doing here—in my rooming house, on my bed?" Claire demanded indignantly.

Buck did not answer that. "Where is Sheriff Potter, Claire?"

"I don't know."

Buck grinned. "I'd never call a woman a liar. I might call her a fibber, though. You never broke jail. The sheriff let you out—and he let you out for a purpose. That purpose wasn't only wanting to get you alone with him out in the badlands, either!"

She bit her lip in anger. "That big, stupid oaf! Got me out in the hills—tried to force himself on me! I sure busted him with a left hook. Right in that fat mug of his!"

"Where is he now?"

"Left the country. At least he claimed he was on his way. He had lots of pressure on him. His wife and kids, jawing and yapping at him all day, and then he lost Jack Perry to the mob."

"Gave him to the mob," Buck corrected.

"Buck McKee, you're wrong there. He

was out cold. Somebody slugged him at the base of the skull and knocked him stiff. That's why you never saw a mark on his bald head. No, Potter is honest, even if the fat fool thought he could wrestle me around—"

"All right, Potter is honest. Then why in hell did he run for the hills? Might he be looking at Hammerhead cattle, Claire? He told you something. I know that. You'd pump him all you could."

"You don't trust me?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"Only as far as I can see you." Buck sat up on the edge of the bed. Behind him the springs squeaked as Tortilla Joe lifted his bulk to a sitting position. "Potter might be wise to something. Is the Hammerhead spread losing cattle, Claire? Did Potter mention that to you?"

"Yes, he did."

"What else did he tell you?"

She spoke slowly. "He's planning to stay out in the rough country, working from a hiding spot. Actually, he's afraid they might kill him."

"Who might kill him?"

"The Crown Prince, or some other Hammerhead men. This has come to a showdown, McKee. Curt Lawrence is going to make a move one way or the other, according to Sheriff Potter. Potter said Lawrence might try to kill him." She repeated, "Potter is honest, you know."

Buck shook his head. "Not Lawrence, honey."

"Who, then?"

Buck looked at her sharply. "What's your deal in this, sister?"

HER eyes were on his. He wished the room were lighter so he could see her better. Behind him Tortilla Joe stirred again, the springs moving. Claire was silent for a little while, apparently considering Buck's question.

"I loved Jack Perry," she burst out then. "I—I lost him, and that's not easy." She seemed close to tears. "I'm only a woman—a dressmaker—but if I could kill Lawrence for lynching Jack—"

She did cry, then. Buck looked at Tortilla Joe's blank face. Suddenly, from out in the alley, came sounds of a scuffle. Buck leaped to the door, gun out. Tortilla Joe swung his legs over the rim of the bed, gun also in hand. Claire McCullen stopped weeping quickly.

Buck said, "Come in, Sitting Bull."

It was a strange sight on which the door opened. Sitting Bull Jones, pulling like a plow horse, puffed into the room, dragging a man behind him. The man was unconscious. Buck peered at the man's bloody face.

"That's the Lawrence gunman you slugged in the alley, Tortilla Joe." Buck glanced at the printer. "You must've tried out that spike-head on him, eh? He was snooping around, I take it?"

"Right. Snooping he was. And I got him."

Tortilla Joe held his nose. "Take him out again. He ees raise the steenk. Here, Buck, you get the boots, I get the shoulders, and we tote heem down the alley to the garbage can, no?"

When they returned, Sitting Bull Jones was questioning Claire, who talked readily. Buck sat down on the bed and listened. She told the printer an altogether different story from what she had told him and Tortilla Joe.

She was, he decided, an accomplished liar. The story finished, Sitting Bull Jones longed to get it on paper. Buck first made the printer swear that he would tell nobody that Claire was in her house.

"I'll tell nobody, Buck," Sitting Bull promised.

"Then get out of here and write your story."

The printer scurried out, and scampered down the alley beside the house. Evidently the Lawrence man, bent double in the garbage can, was still asleep. Otherwise, he would have tangled with old Sitting Bull.

In Claire McCullen's bedroom Tortilla Joe yawned. "I'm sleepy."

Claire McCullen yawned. "I had no sleep last night."

"There's a wide bed," Buck reminded.

"I won't sleep with you two gents!"

Buck said, "Safety in numbers, honey."

Fully dressed, with only their boots off, he and Tortilla Joe rolled under the covers. Claire sat stiffly in the chair. Buck heard her reach over and bolt the door, and he knew they had her then. He dozed off. When he awakened, she lay between them. He put his arm around her.

"Please don't!"

She seemed very earnest. Buck remembered her saying she loved—or, rather, she *had* loved—Jack Perry. She was warm and smooth against him, and he liked the feel of her body. But still, he was sleepy.

He did a little thinking, despite his sleepy condition. She lay quiet and limp under his outflung arm, her breathing deep and regular. Suddenly he reached his decision.

"Tomorrow night, Claire, you and me and Tortilla Joe rob a bank."

"We do what?" She almost struggled up.

Buck repeated, "Rob a bank. . . ."

SHERIFF POTTER ate like a starved wolf. With Claire's help the partners had found his hiding place in the hills, and had brought him food. Around the food crammed in his mouth now he said, "They had the pressure on me, McKee. I had to get out. I got afraid for my life. Hell, yes, they slugged me. My neck still feels like somebody tried to unhinge my head. Now I know how a rabbit feels when you give him a chop across the back of the neck."

He tied into a ham sandwich. His head bobbed; the sun glistened on the bald dome; he gave himself over to his job.

"What's it all about?" Buck asked him.

"Curt Lawrence wants the Cinchring crew out of the basin. He engineered it around so he got Jack Perry lynched. Jack had to die, anyhow, because Jack had killed Old John Lawrence."

"Did he?"

"Sign pointed that way."

Buck got to his feet. Tortilla Joe arose, too, brushed off his pants. Claire McCullen stood upright, watching them. Watching and listening. More yarn had gone into the pattern now, and Buck was getting the whole picture. Of course, there were still some loose ends.

Buck asked, "The Hammerhead, they tell me, has been losing cattle."

The sheriff took another bite, nodded. "So Curt Lawrence claims. Says the homesteaders are running them off and selling them south of the Border in Mexico. I don't know. I trailed sign, lost it. Never was no hand at dogging it with my nose to the ground. I might head into Phoenix."

"Why?" Buck asked.

"Get the U. S. marshals to help me. Jail delivery is a serious charge. Might be able to make it a federal offense."

Buck said, "You claim the pressure was pounding you down and you got scared of your life. Who would move against you, Potter."

"Do I have to give names?"

"You don't have to. But I'd appreciate it, sir."

"I won't tell."

Buck said, "All right, I've changed my mind. I have to know."

With the flat of his hand he pushed the sheriff ahead. Tortilla Joe's rising dark fist collided with the lawman's jaw. Potter went down and Buck had his gun. Potter, reaching back, found only an empty holster.

"Who were you afraid of?" Buck demanded.

Potter, holding his aching head, said dully, "You boys play for keeps. What if I won't talk?"

Buck said grimly, "That was only a starter."

Potter looked at Tortilla Joe. This time the Mexican's face was not long and lonesome—it was hard and stern. Potter looked at Claire McCullen. No help there. Then his eyes swiveled around to Buck.

"Curt Lawrence, mostly," he blurted. "He's the kingpin of Hammerhead range and his dad built Buckskin town. I'd either have to kowtow or get killed. Hell, I know who lynched Jack Perry. Every mad dog of them were Hammerhead men!"

"Who else was in it?" prodded Buck,

not convinced.

"The banker, Martin Halloway."

Buck glanced at Claire. She had given a small start. "I don't get your point on that score, Sheriff Potter," she said. "Halloway is friendly with Lawrence, of course, but he is not dangerous, is he?"

"Every man on this range is dangerous," the sheriff said. "Halloway and Lawrence are good friends, and don't forget that."

Buck thought, Yeah, such good friends, that Halloway loves up Lawrence's wife. He asked aloud, "Who owns the Hammerhead outfit. Sheriff?"

The sheriff looked at him queerly. "Why ask that? Curt Lawrence owns it, of course."

"No mortgages on it? No liens against it?"

"None recorded, McKee. I'm county recorder, too, you know. No instrument of mortgage or lien ever been sent to my office for public record."

Buck said, "Just an idea, Sheriff."

The lawman rubbed his jaw gingerly. "When I get back to town with the marshals from Phoenix I aim to jug you two for beating me up."

"You got witnesses?" Buck wanted to know.

"I got Claire."

Buck looked at Claire. "What's the man talking about? You sure wouldn't turn against me after sleeping with me all night, would you?"

Claire flushed. The sheriff's eyes were hen eggs bugging out as he stared at her. Tortilla Joe tittered.

"I never saw a thing," the girl said. "And I never slept with you, either, Buck McKee!" She looked at the sheriff. "Tortilla Joe was in bed with us, too."

Sheriff Potter's stare widened. "And I tried to love you and you fought like a tiger! Then you sleep with these two sixgun sinners!"

"Don't get ideas!" Claire's voice was suddenly harsh. She had a tough vein underneath. Buck had detected this before on this day. He wondered if his first impression of her, the day she had collided with Tortilla Joe's bronc, had been a correct one. Then she had seemed girlish, naïve, and sweet; now, sometimes, her words were harsh, holding undertones of a strange hardness. She was showing this side for a moment now.

Potter changed the subject gladly. "You staying here with me, Claire?"

She was going with Buck and Tortilla Joe, she said. Potter allowed that his wife might try to tangle with her.

"She wouldn't go so far as to use a pistol or shotgun," he said, "but she can hit, that old girl can! And when she uses them long fingernails of her'n you'd swear you was tangling with a female bobcat."

"I'll chance that," Claire said shortly.

CHAPTER IX

Tonight We Rob a Bank

THE three of them—Claire, Tortilla Joe, and Buck—rode away. Buck made little conversation, and Tortilla Joe only grunted. When they reached the dirt camp of Cinchring Construction, Buck talked with Fiddlefoot Garner. He kept the talk private. and all the time Garner's big head shook in negation. Tortilla Joe and Claire. sitting in the shade of a *saguaro* cactus. could not hear what was said. But Fiddlefoot Garner was swearing to Buck that none of the farmers had ever rustled a Hammerhead cow.

The construction boss grew red-faced and emphatic. He pounded a fist into a big palm, the report sounding like that of a bum shotgun shell. If any Hammerhead cattle were being rustled, Fiddlefoot's men were not stealing them. They were going south across the Border into Mexico, and were not being eaten at the tables in the construction camp. And what was more, if Lawrence kept pestering Cinchring Construction—

Buck said, "Don't holler so loud. You'll knock down one of them flytrap houses over in Buckskin town."

"Well, I don't like them accusations, no more than Jack Perry liked them! Heard maybe the sheriff has gone for help in Phoenix. That so?"

"You don't say! Well, the big potbelly sure needs help. They tell me he's so heavy on his feet it's all he can do to get out of bed in the mornings."

"Ah, I mean help from the law, not to get on his pins. Sometimes, McKee, you talk sort of addled-like, if you excuse me saying such a thing."

"You're sure excused," Buck said, grinning.

They left the giant in the camp. Fiddlefoot Garner stood there and shook his head mournfully and slowly, looking like a dehorned bull being bothered by blowflies.

Some of the farmers had their wives and families along, living in tents surrounding the big tent. One of the women, a long-geared, flat-breasted female, stopped Buck and Tortilla Joe and Claire.

"We sure don't want no war, Mr. McKee," she protested. "A good husband is hard to get nowadays, and I sure want to hang onto my man. Besides, we got eleven young uns. Do what you can to stop this trouble, will you, Mr. McKee?"

Other women crowded around. They ran to a type, Buck noticed—poor, shabby, yet meticulously clean, despite poverty. Everything they had—their little money, their future, their hopes—were tied up in Cinchring Construction. Buck felt tension in the group, despite the women's timidity. If and when a showdown came these women would ride with their men and they would carry rifles.

Buck promised he would do his best and they thanked him. One woman had tears in her eyes and, when he rode on, she called to him, thanking him for his and he noticed that Tortilla Joe had to aid. Buck had a tight spot in his throat swallow before he could speak.

Claire said, "Ugly, broken-down things."

Buck glanced at her fresh beauty. "Women must have been born hating each other." This philosophy dispensed, he looked toward the future. And then he turned on stirrups and spoke to Tortilla Joe.

"Joe, you swing to the north, look at the range there. Scout for signs of cattle being moved recently. Take Claire with you. She's safer with you than with me. I look at her and get ideas."

"I'll go with you, Buck," she said hastily.

Buck shook his head. "There's too much woman to you, Claire, and I ain't got my hammerlock hold down good yet. I might get the worst of the scrap, and I'd hate like hell to say a woman throwed me!"

She stuck out her tongue at him. Then she turned her horse and followed Tortilla Joe. Buck swung his sweaty bronc south toward the Hammerhead spread. As he rode down a sand wash, a jackrabbit suddenly leaped out of sagebrush, scaring his bronc. The jack had kicked a hole into the sand and had been sleeping in the hole, for it had been cooler in the earth.

The Hamerhead was a big outfit. Buck admired the home spread from a hummock. Iron trees grew in the yard and with these were some huge manzanitas, their red trunks shiny in the sun. He saw the guard before the guard saw him. Buck rode in with his right hand high in the sign of peace, his left hand away from his gun as he held the reins.

The guard was a bowlegged, low-browed man, and he carried a Winchester .30-30. Buck felt a tingling along his spine as he looked at the cocked hammer of the rifle.

"You won't need to cock that, feller. I come to see Lawrence and his missus, if they are home."

"They're in the house. Dismount on this side of your bronc and watch your hands, McKee."

Buck dismounted, his smile twisted. "You take no chances, friend," he murmured.

THEY went to the long adobe ranch house, the guard behind Buck. Riders watched from the shade of the bunkhouse

—a touchy, tough bunch of riders. They said nothing, but their eyes spoke for them. Vigilance. Hardness. Gun-riders. Tough men.

Buck and his escort crossed the porch, boot heels clicking on flagstones. Then into an immense living room with naked oak beams. Sybil Lawrence, sitting in a rocking chair, was crocheting, and when she looked up she seemed small and demure and domestic. Buck was surprised. Previous to this she had always been so brassy and hard and sophisticated. He took off his hat.

"Sit down, Buck," she invited.

Buck said, "How are you?"

She was fine. She moved a little and sunlight reflected facets of light from her red hair.

"My husband is in his office. Go get him, John."

The guard left. Sybil looked at Buck. Buck looked at her.

He said, "You're a lovely woman, Mrs. Lawrence."

"Sometimes the lovely ones are the deceitful ones," she murmured.

"You must have expected me."

"I thought you'd come and talk to me sooner or later."

Curt Lawrence entered, and he scowled. "What's on your mind, McKee?"

Buck said, "Don't jump too fast into the collar, sonny. You're in trouble up to your bull-headed neck and your neck might get stretched. Potter is heading into Phoenix for the U. S. Marshal there. Jail delivery and hanging isn't a cinch even if you are a Lawrence."

"Maybe I wasn't behind the lynching," Lawrence growled.

Buck stood up. "Now you've said something. You have lost cattle. My pardner and I met you yesterday on the desert, remember? Well, you were out scouting range, counting cattle. But somebody trailed you."

Husband and wife exchanged glances.

Curt Lawrence said, "Who was it?" and Buck said, "I think you know."

Buck put on his hat. "My pardner and I are ready to close this thing. We got the loose ends sewed up."

"I doubt that," Lawrence clipped.

"Doubt and be damned!" Buck McKee clipped back at him. "You get in my way, you big tub of lard, and you'll get killed!"

"Why, you—"

Sybil Lawrence said quickly, "Curt, stay back! This man is speaking the truth. Keep out of his way."

"I've stood too much!" he shot out. "I've been doublecrossed and you're the only one who has stood by me, Sybil! This gent comes into my home and—"

"Hold your temper, Curt!"

The redhead's voice was stern. Her husband stopped, looked at her, then at Buck. And when he bowed slightly, his smile was ironic.

"I had forgot, Mr. McKee, that you were my guest."

Buck spoke to Sybil. "Keep him in line."

She nodded.

Buck went out to his bronc. Again, as he crossed the hoof-packed yard, the wolves sat in the shade. They had watchful, canine eyes. He mounted and rode away, bronc kicking sand. He had found out something. Not much, but a little; it all added together. He remembered Lawrence's angry, stormy face. Still, in that face had been something else. Was it bafflement, puzzlement? Sybil Lawrence was the stronger one, he realized, though, when it came to a showdown, the shaggy wolf in Curt Lawrence would come through. He was a man. She a woman.

Buck met Tortilla Joe and Claire McCullen on Carrizo Creek. Tortilla Joe said, "The cattles they wild as all beelly hell, which means they been chased. Thees heifer, she ride off on me, but we get together again."

"I didn't leave him, Buck," Claire denied. "I was out scouting for cattle. They are wild, like he says."

Buck said as he had said to them before, "Tonight we rob a bank."

And he looked suddenly at Claire McCullen.

Her pretty face had suddenly gone pale. . . .

BACK in town, with all their final plans laid, Claire had one last objection to make, when they were in the general store, replenishing their supplies.

She said, "I've got to watch out for the sheriff's wife. The stupid fool—thinking I'd run off with that ugly husband of hers!"

"I'll take care of you," Buck assured.

The storekeeper, a small man in a long apron, said, "I don't know much of what this is all about, but don't make no rash promises, cowboy. You wouldn't talk so easy if you had met Potter's woman on the field of combat. One day she almost whupped me."

"Not for runnin' off with her husband, surely?" Buck joked.

"I overcharged her a dime on her monthly bill. —Now what can I do for you, Mr. McKee?"

Suddenly he stopped short as he glanced out the window, and stood in reverent silence. Some citizens were burying the gunman Buck had killed. Claire looked out the window also at the coffin as it went by on a wagon. But Buck paid the procession no attention. His eyes roamed around the store. Everything was in it, from needles to threshing-machines, though they were out in the implement yard. This storekeeper was up on his toes. He even had stocked farming equipment.

"Another poor soul has reached his resting place," the merchant said piously. "They tell me they buried poor Jack Perry in the fill on the dam his crew is constructing."

Buck nodded.

"Fitting resting place for him," the merchant murmured. "His heart and soul was in constructing that dam. It is indeed fitting that his earthly remains be interred there."

Buck nodded again. If he didn't watch out, the man would grow eloquent. He asked if he could get any black powder.

"You certainly can, sir." The man scowled slightly. "Do you want to take it out to the dam for blasting purposes? Only reason I have powder is because the construction men put in an order for it."

Buck wanted only a small amount, he said. He got it and thanked the man. Then he asked if the store carried any metal drills. It did, and Buck bought five, along with a hand drill.

By this time the merchant was really scowling in puzzlement. What would a cowpuncher do with black powder, fuse, and a bunch of steel drills? Another person who had entered quietly, also watched, and Buck shot him a quick glance. It was none other than the banker, Martin Halloway.

"Howdy, Mr. Banker," Buck said cheerfully.

Halloway allowed himself the pleasure of a tight smile. Evidently this cowpuncher was going to be a little sociable, after all. But when Halloway returned the greeting his jaw ached. He decided he didn't like this lanky cowhand.

"Going to go out blasting, McKee?" he asked.

"Out blasting," Buck concurred.

"We need a wrecking bar, *tambien*," Tortilla Joe said. "And more forty-five cartreedges for our gons, no?"

"That's right," Buck agreed.

Again the merchant frowned. He laid the wrecking bar on the counter and Buck studied it. He pronounced it satisfactory and then, his purchases carried by himself and his partner, he left the store and went to the livery-barn. There he laid his purchases in the shade and checked on the amount of hay in the stalls where their broncs were tied.

"We need fast and strong getaway broncs," he told Claire and Tortilla Joe.

Claire said uncertainly, "You mean you still intend to rob the bank, Buck?"

"That's why I bought this stuff. I wonder if the banker got suspicious. Seemed odd he come in that store just then, wasn't it?"

"Just a coincidence, probably," Claire said. Buck saw a tiny frown start on her forehead. "I don't see how you boys can help Jack Perry by robbing Mr. Halloway's bank."

"Lawrence keeps Hammerhead dinero

there," Buck said. "We'll get it and turn it over to Fiddlefoot Garner and his farmers and let them build their irrigation system with Lawrence's dinero."

"*Si*, we be Robeen Hood," Tortilla Joe said happily.

"You've robbed banks before?"

Buck grinned. "We sure have, Claire." Suddenly he gave her a hard look. She stepped back. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her until her dark tresses shook. "You even think of squealing on us, sister, and we'll cut your pretty gizzard out and feed it to the buzzards!"

"Buck you hurt me!"

"You heard me, didn't you? You even think of hollering—"

SHE pushed his hands away. "I'm in this to the end with you boys. I'm sick and tired of this damned old town and its stupid people. When they killed Jack— Well, I'm riding out with you, Buck."

Buck eyed her. "Good girl," he finally said.

They went to Claire's room. Buck said he had to go out and get some smoking tobacco and papers. He left Claire with Tortilla Joe. He bought some Durham—a carton of it—and some wheatstraw papers. Then he went to the bank where he laid twenty dollars on the counter.

"Will you break this gold piece for me, Mr. Halloway?"

"With pleasure."

Buck got some silver dollars and two five-dollar gold pieces in return. He let Halloway get friendly with him. All the time, he got the impression the man was feeling him out—jabbing here, probing there, touching at this point.

When he returned to the McCullen house he asked Tortilla Joe, "Where's Claire?"

"She go out—buy some coffee, she say."

Buck snorted. "There's a skylight in the bank. You be there on the roof. I'll unlatch the skylight hooks right after I get in. I'll go in the back door. I just scouted the joint."

"How far to skylight from the floor? I fat mans. If I fall too hard, maybe I gets hurt, no?"

"I'll bring pillows for the floor," Buck jibed.

CHAPTER X

Guns in the Night

WITHIN the hour, Claire came in. By that time the room was filled with tobacco smoke. Tortilla Joe chewed an endless series of tortillas. His jaws sounded like the jaws of a husky Ohio hog cracking corn. Claire sat down beside Buck. Her thigh, he noticed, pressed against his, seemingly in promise.

Dusk came, turned to night; they did not light a lamp. Buck lay back on the bed and Claire lay beside him, her head on his arm. Buck slept.

Her lips on his awakened him. He put his arm around her, held her close, and kissed her. Across the room Tortilla Joe slept with animal hoarseness, his snores deep and sonorous.

"Buck, what is my job?" Claire asked.

"You stay in the alley with a pistol and watch. I go in the back door and you hide out there and cover my back."

"And Tortilla Joe?"

"He'll be across the street in front of the saloon, watching the front door of the bank. With you two on guard, I'll be safe as a bug in a rug."

"You think you can crack the safe?"

Buck lied. "Hell, I've done it before, and I can do it again. I looked the joint over this afternoon. Safe's like a tin can. A little hole, some powder, a fuse, a little *boom*—presto, the door will pop open like an old maid's eyes when she sees a kid in swimming naked."

"Oh! You have cracked safes before?"

"I'm no beginner."

They lay in the dark. Buck ran his hand up and down her spine under her shirt; she seemed to like it. Tortilla Joe awakened in the rocking chair. He looked

around and asked, "What time she ees, Buckshot?"

"About that time."

The Mexican arose, joints creaking, said, "Me, I get old, like the horse, and I make noises in my bones." He stretched, yawned. "We go get the money, give half to the farmers, keep half for ourselves and for Claire, no?"

"Yes," Buck said.

With Buck carrying the sack of supplies, they went into the night. Down the alley with its tin cans and refuse. Buckskin town was silent, sleeping under the Arizona moon—deceptive, seemingly lazy, yet alert underneath. Buck felt of the night and the town, and read danger in both. Then he thought of the gunman coming out from behind the garbage can, the gunman who had aimed to kill him, and he stiffened. Within a few moments, this would all be over—but would he and Tortilla Joe still be alive?

Tortilla Joe said, "I cross the street, watch from the front. Good luck, my fran Buckshot." Buck had cautioned him not to mention the skylight.

"*Gracias*," Buck said.

The obese Mexican became part of the night. Claire shuddered, and not from the cold; the night was warm. They were behind the bank.

Buck said, "Squat over there by that shed, gun out, and watch, woman."

"All right, Buck. And—good luck."

Buck went to the back door. He jammed the wrecking-bar in hard between jamb and door edge. He heard the sharp end cut into pine. He hammered again, driving it in further; he tested it, strength against the bar. And along his spine was an area of fear.

The bar held, the door creaked, the hinges moved slightly. But still, the door remained locked. Buck whacked again, then lay his weight on the bar. Hinges protested, the lock-latch held. He pushed harder, felt the latch leave the casing. And the door swung in.

He glanced up and down the alley. He could not see Claire. He went into the bank, closing the door behind him. Because of the protruding latch, the door would not close, of course. He heard boots on the roof. He knew there was a long sitck in the corner, used to open the skylight for ventilation. He had seen the stick that afternoon. He got it, reached up. He heard glass break and a hand came down and caught the stick.

"Me, I find hooks, Buck."

Buck let the Mexican unhook the skylight. Then it opened, and Buck dropped the stick to the floor and went to the safe. He lit a lamp and looked at the safe. He didn't know the first thing about how to open one. For of course he had never cracked one before. He shook out his tools.

The lamplight was dim. He doubted if it could be seen outside because of the low-pulled blinds.

He had expected the man to come in from the alley. But, instead, the fellow came out of a side room. He held a .45, and the gun was on Buck.

THE door had opened without a sound. So despite Buck's vigilance, the man had a gun on the lanky cowpuncher before Buck could even reach for his own .45, which he had placed on a nearby chair.

"McKee, this is the end of the trail for you!"

Evidently the man did not know that Tortilla Joe was on the roof, looking down on him. Evidently he had not even heard Buck open the skylight because of the closed door of the room in which he had been hiding. Everything, then, was working out all right.

Except that this gent had the drop on Buck, and Buck had expected to get a gun on him first.

Buck said, voice slightly dry, "Well, what you got to say, Halloway?"

"What have I got to say?" Halloway's voice showed surprise. "You're the gent who hasn't got anything to say. The angels are tickling you with their wings, McKee. Robbing a bank is a serious offense, and when I kill you no questions will be asked. I'll be the town hero."

Halloway cocked the gun. The noise was loud there in the silent bank. Lamplight flickered, making weird, eerie shadows against the wall.

"You and your woman played a tight game," Buck said slowly, watching the .45. "She pretended to be in love with Perry and all the while she was pumping him for information, which she turned over to you."

"She tell you that?"

"Fiddlefoot Garner put me wise. He happened to mention that Perry had told her everything. That gave me an idea."

Buck was stalling for time. Why didn't that fat Mexican drop down, gun out?

"Then Sybil Lawrence played up to you. The Hammerhead is bankrupt, and you hold notes on it. You and your gang have rustled Curt Lawrence blind, blaming it on the nesters. Sybil played up to you trying to get information out of you."

"She's talked to you, damn her!"

Buck went on, "I've got a promise from the Lawrences that, if I clear this up, get rid of you, they'll not bother Cinchring Construction any more. Sybil promised that today and her word is good."

Halloway's tongue snaked out and wet his lips. He watched Buck with beady, scheming eyes. He wanted to know all that Buck knew. But the hand that held the .45 was rock-steady.

"You and Claire came to this town about the same time," Buck went on. "By accident, Sybil Lawrence came at the same time, and at first that looked bad to me. I thought you two was in cahoots."

Halloway said, "You sound interesting, McKee. We're having a nice little confidential talk before your—ah—demise. What more do you know?"

The door had opened. Claire McCullen had stepped inside. She had her pistol up, and her jaw was steel-hard. Her eyes glistened with a maniacal light. Gone was all the appealing femininity, the soft womanliness. She was a killer with lips drawn back, body tense.

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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Buck watched her. Up above, unseen, Tortilla Joe watched, too, and waited. The woman had to be tolled forward so the Mexican would land beside her. Buck said, "Sister, you'll go to the pen for this."

She said, in an even voice, "I never killed Old John Lawrence. This banker shot him from ambush after stealing Jack Perry's rifle, using it, and returning it. You have no evidence on me. I watched you sneak to the Hammerhead today. I had an idea you would ride over and talk to the Lawrence tribe. I warned this banker you aimed to rob his bank. I pulled you into this trap, McKee. When it's over, I'll be alive, and you and this banker'll be dead!"

Halloway watched her. In his eyes, too, was a fanatical light. "You'd doublecross me, after all we've been through, Claire?"

"I'd be glad to get rid of you. With you gone, I'd inherit this bank, and I'd have what I wanted—money and no Martin Halloway to bother me."

Halloway said, "My God, woman— You cheap, dirty, double-dealing—"

She came forward, eyes glittering, eyes watchful. She moved in under the skylight, and then Tortilla Joe, falling like a steer going over a cliff, landed on her. Buck heard her gasp. Her .45 went off, and lead hit steel. Buck instinctively ducked, then dived for his gun. He hit the chair, got his .45, and rolled over.

Tortilla Joe was sprawled on the floor, but Claire was on her feet. And she was shooting. Her gun talked, spitting wicked, evil flame.

She did not shoot at Buck.

Nor did she shoot at Tortilla Joe.

She shot at Martin Halloway. Her bullets hit him, too. Buck waited, kneeling on one knee, gun up, gun ready. Tortilla Joe had rolled to the far wall. Now, sitting against the wall, his legs spread ahead of him, the Mexican watched, lamplight glistening on his .45.

The roar of gun thunder was loud. Buck saw Halloway shudder, go to one knee. The banker shot twice, emptying his .45. Both bullets caught Claire McCullen. They killed her on her feet, before she fell.

HALLOWAY dropped his gun. He looked at Buck. He was on both knees. He looked at Tortilla Joe.

"You boys didn't have to fire—a shot. I thought I'd pull the—doublecross on her—but she beat me to it."

Somewhere outside dogs barked. People shouted.

Halloway said slowly, "Even in death, she wins." He looked at his .45. "It was a—long trail. We were married—over sixteen years. She was—my wife. We worked inside—on banks—came here to get away from the law back East—"

Buck said nothing.

Tortilla Joe said nothing.

Halloway said, "Even in death—the woman always wins." Then he lay down, put his head on his arm, and died.

Hurriedly Buck checked. Claire also was dead. Then, leaving the burglar tools behind, he and Tortilla Joe were in the alley, heading for their broncs.

A man called, "McKee, shooting. Down by the bank!"

"Never heard it," Buck said.

Then the partners were in saddle, roaring out of town. A few miles out of Buckskin they drew rein on a mesquite-covered hummock.

Tortilla Joe said, "She tough woman, Buck. She make like she ride for Cinchring, and Lawrence he fall for it and follow her. She run into my horse. You remember her bello legs, no?"

Buck said, "She lured Lawrence out of town, then Halloway went ahead with the lynching. Halloway probably paid that gunman wages, too—the one I killed. Well, we talk to the Lawrences, and I'll bawl out old Blubber-mouth Curt again, then south for the Gila."

"We write Ol' Sam Perry, too."

"Sam Perry's son," Buck said slowly, "sleeps in peace." ● ● ●

NEXT ISSUE: ★ HELL MOVES TO MONTANA by Tom Roan
★ WHO AIN'T BLOODTHIRSTY? by T. C. McClary

By HASCAL GILES

He stood in a slight crouch, his gun drawn

WHEN A MAN STANDS ALONE

FOR a week after his partner was killed, Irby Barlow stayed out of town, and it began to look as though he weren't going to do anything about it. But Irby rode into Tank Town finally and stopped in front of the Comanche Hotel with the preoccupied air of a man who really has something weighty on his mind.

He was still fumbling with the pinto's reins when he heard mincing footsteps and caught the heady aroma of Stella Dunham's lilac perfume. Irby patted the horse's neck and turned to meet the fiery

Irby's partner had been stabbed to death—so why in blazing hell wasn't Irby doing something about it?

glance of Stella's brown eyes with an apologetic look.

"Well?" Stella demanded.

Irby knew what the question meant, but he doubted his ability to supply an acceptable answer. He rubbed a hand over his sunburned brow, fully aware that Stella knew his heart was jumping because of her nearness and that his mind was struggling to find words which would ease him out of a situation and still save his pride.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking about Dan, Stella," Irby said. He moved around the head of his horse, and a flash of light streaked across the rutted alkali of Tank Town's main street. Irby touched the diamond stickpin on the lapel of his frock coat to shade the sparkle of the gem. He shook his head in solemn concern. "It certainly isn't right to let someone kill your partner and get away with it."

Stella's blond hair shone like burnished silver under the dying rays of the sun as she nodded vigorously, but it was more of a gesture of disgust than of assent.

"So you've been thinking. After a week you've thought up exactly what everyone in town thought the night Dan got killed. Irby, what I want to know—and what everyone else wants to know—is what you're going to do about it. I wish my father had lived. I know what he'd do. And if I had a friend who was as close to me as Dan Roby was to you, I know what I'd do about it, too!"

As Stella spoke she patted the buttoned holster on her hip, and Irby did not take her remarks lightly. A pearl-handled .32 pistol was snuggled down in that holster, and anyone who had grown up in the same house with big Steve Dunham had had to learn how to handle a gun.

For the first time in his life Irby Barlow felt keenly cheated because he had never had such training and he shared Stella's regret over Steve Dunham's death. Steve Dunham had worn the marshal's badge and during the thirty years he had patrolled the rock and brush-bounded little cowtown settlement killers and cutthroats had ridden a wide circle around Tank Town.

But a man couldn't live forever, and Steve Dunham's time had come three months ago. The town was shocked by his unexpected death but not disturbed enough to exercise any speed in hiring a successor.

"The town council is sure taking its time in replacing your father," Irby said uneasily. "He had this place so thoroughly under his thumb, they've forgotten what it can be like without law. It's so far to the county seat the sheriff won't send a deputy down this way once a year."

"With all he's got on his hands he'll worry little about a killing that ought to take care of itself. Dan was your friend, Irby, not the sheriff's."

Irby gripped the bleached hitching pole and stared thoughtfully at his hands. "I was Dan's friend, all right. Are you mine, Stella?"

"I was," Stella said stubbornly.

"Are you still?" Irby insisted. His eyes searched her face. Stella evaded his gaze for a few seconds, but when she finally looked at him, Irby saw in her eyes the tenderness and anxiety he had hoped for.

"You know I am, Irby," she said softly, moving up to touch his arm. "I want exactly what you want. I want to get married and settle down and raise a family—our family, Irby. But I want our children to be able to look at their dad and see a strong man and when I walk down Tank Town's street, I want to hold my head up proud. I don't want to be ashamed of anything."

Irby nodded. "I just wanted to be sure, Stella. I remember something your father said once. He mentioned to me that when he was absent from town he could appoint somebody to serve in his place. Since the council hasn't got around to hiring a new marshal, there's no one to say he didn't appoint you before he died—him being absent, so to speak."

"What are you trying to say, Irby?"

"If anything happens to me, Stella, I'd expect you to take it up."

AS IRBY BARLOW touched his narrow-brimmed black hat, meaning to walk away, Stella Dunham's mouth opened in alarm. She held firmly to his arm.

"Now listen to me, Irby Barlow. You don't even know which end of a gun has the sight on it. I don't want you to go off and get yourself killed just —"

"You women sure do confuse a man," Irby smiled. "You want me to do something, but you don't. I'm not fool enough to try it with a gun, Stella. But I've hit upon a way to let Dan's killer dig his own grave—maybe."

Lifting Stella's hand gently from his arm, Irby strode away. Protesting, Stella ran along beside him for a few steps. Irby turned into the Broken Bottle Saloon to stop her pursuit. Just inside, he glanced back at Stella's face. Her soft lips were a splash of appealing color in the paleness of her face as they formed a silent warning: "He hates you, too, Irby."

It was an hour before darkness, and the Broken Bottle had only a scattering of customers. The two men at the bar and the half dozen around the tables broke off their talk for a minute to look at Irby Barlow. He knew they were hoping to see the bulge of a pistol. Disappointment showed in their faces when they were sure he had none.

These men had been Dan Roby's friends, too. Dan had ridden for one or another of the ranches around Tank Town since he had been big enough to sit a saddle, and they felt that vengeance for his death was Irby's responsibility. Some whispered that Roby would be alive now if he'd never accepted a partnership in Irby's Snake-in-a-Box Ranch.

Irby had no more talent for hard liquor than he did for riding range or handling a gun. He ordered a glass of beer, carried it to a corner table, and sat down alone. Stella Dunham's quiet warning came to his mind again, freezing his stomach into a tight knot of nervousness. He picked up a deck of cards and laid out a hand of solitaire, ignoring the disdainful stares which continued to come his way. Irby strung the card game out for an hour, glancing up each time the doors swished to admit another customer, then turning his attention back to the cards. He looked as if he were waiting for something, and he was.

Irby's vigil ended shortly after sundown. The doors of the saloon banged open, and Irby watched a tall, dark-skinned man swagger up to the bar. Irby's slender, fine-boned face paled under its peeling sunburn as he rose to carry his glass back to the bar. He was very careful to find a place beside the newcomer, before he set down the glass, which was still half full of warm beer, and asked the bartender for another.

While he waited for his order to be filled, Irby casually fingered the diamond stickpin on the lapel of his coat. He felt the eyes of the man beside him following his hand, but he did not look around until the man grunted, "Evening, Barlow."

"Why, hello, Mr. Caton," Irby said. "I guess I had my mind on something else and didn't notice it was you."

"Yeah," Les Caton said sarcastically, "I know a little man like me is plumb easy to walk over without seeing." He took a deep breath, swelling his broad chest, and ran his thumbs around the cartridge-studded gunbelt which sagged under the weight of his black-handled Colt. "I thought you said you lost the stickpin."

Irby's hand caressed the diamond. He paid for his beer, said, without looking at Les Caton, "I found it again, Mr. Caton."

He started back toward the table, but Les Caton's big hand grabbed his shoulder. "That was an excuse you were using to keep from selling it back to me, Barlow. Now that Roby's dead, you don't have to worry about sentiment no more. You can sell it to me without hurting his feelings none. I'll push the price up to four hundred."

Irby shook his head stubbornly, but he was afraid to let Les Caton see the satisfaction in his eyes. "There isn't enough money in the world to buy this stickpin, Caton. Dan gave it to me after he won it off you and he'd roll over in his grave if I sold it back to you."

IRBY BARLOW'S refusal was louder than it needed to be, but he wanted to be sure everyone in the saloon heard him.

"All right, feller," Caton grunted, tight-lipped. "Keep the damned thing. It don't mean what it did once."

Irby did not answer him. He returned to the corner table, but he did not stay long. As soon as Les Caton became interested in a poker game on the other side of the room, Irby slipped out a side door into the alley.

He walked slowly to the end of the dark passageway and then followed the weed-grown footpath toward Pop Lacy's livery stable at the edge of the open range. It was like treading in footsteps of the dead, for this was the last walk Dan Roby had taken.

A late-riding cowboy had found Dan crumpled in the dust sometime between midnight and dawn, a Bowie knife buried to the hilt in his back. Only his stubborn will had kept him breathing until then. An ordinary man would have been dead when he fell, but Dan had hung on until the blood was drained from him.

Jim Sawyer, the Broken Bottle bartender, had sent for Irby Barlow. Dan was a man who had to have his liquor and his poker and he had slipped away from the night camp with word he would be back in time to start his chores at sunup. Dan would have done it, too. He wasn't the kind of man who let pleasure interfere with duty, and even without sleep he could outwork most men. He was proud of his stamina, of his skill with a gun and a rope, and of his luck. It was this pride of his which had made Les Caton hate him.

Dan had played poker with Les Caton that night and won three hundred dollars from the man, and when they searched Dan's body he still had the money in his pockets. There was nothing to tie the killing to Les Caton. The knife in Dan's back was like a thousand others which could be bought in any outfitting store in the West. It could have belonged to a dozen men. Only Irby Barlow knew it belonged to Les Caton, for Dan Roby had told him so.

They had laid Dan out on a green-topped dice table in the Broken Bottle Saloon by the time Irby reached town. Irby thought he was already dead, but old Doc Ransom had leaned close to Dan and then motioned hurriedly for Irby to come nearer.

Irby had placed his ear almost against Dan's pale lips. The words sounded like an echo from a well, but Irby had understood them.

"He finally done it, pard," Dan had whispered. "Caton finally won the big pot—with a Bowie knife as his hole card. But you keep the stickpin!"

Then Dan Roby had died. Irby Barlow had turned away to face a row of expectant faces. They were sure that Dan Roby had named his killer with his last breath, and Irby knew what they expected of him. Yet he dropped his eyes away from the hard glances and lied to the men who had gathered around to watch Dan Roby die.

"He didn't call any names," Irby had told them.

Although he knew the diamond stickpin was a factor in Dan Roby's death, the thought of using it as a weapon had not occurred to Irby Barlow right away. He had thought first of the things Dan Roby would have used—brawling fists and fast-drawn guns. But these were of no value to a man new to this land where, at some time, each man had to be his own law.

Irby was a banker by trade, but like many a quiet man born into a quiet world, he had dreamed of a more satisfying life. From the pioneers who visited his father's bank in St. Louis, Irby heard fabulous stories of riches and opportunity in the West, and finally he had come for them.

By the time he reached Tank Town, Irby had learned that the frontier guarded its promises jealously from those who did not know its ways. When he met Stella Dunham, it had been worth returning to a bank job to remain near her. He started working at the Cattleman's Bank, but he never lost sight of the dreams he had brought with him.

When the bank put the old Snake-in-a-Box Ranch up for auction, Irby had sent a hurried plea to his father in St. Louis. A few days later he had sufficient cash to buy it.

KNOWING nothing of cattle and grass, Irby had persuaded Dan Roby to act as his representative in the bidding. It was the beginning of the quiet feud which grew into smoldering hate between Dan Roby and Les Caton.

Caton was not a total stranger in Tank Town, but little was known of him. He drifted in and out at irregular intervals and when he came, Marshal Steve Dunham had kept a close check on him. He wore his gun low and threatening and always had plenty of spending money.

There were rumors that he dealt in wetback cattle on both sides of the Rio Grande, so when he showed up for the Snake-in-a-Box auction, Marshal Dunham had feared the man was looking for a permanent base for his mysterious dealings. Dunham had urged Irby Barlow to use every means of keeping him off the Tank Town range. Irby had done this by instructing Dan Roby to top every bid Caton offered.

Les Caton was not accustomed to being crossed, and the meanness in him came into the open at the auction. Realizing that he couldn't beat what Irby was willing to pay for the ranch, he had put a hand on his gun and walked to Dan Roby's side.

He had told Dan he wanted the ranch, one way or another, and that if Dan made another bid, he'd bend the gun around his skull. Dan had laughed at him, made his bid, and ducked Caton's wicked swing.

A moment later Les Caton was stretched out on the ground, his mouth bleeding, and Dan Roby's high-heeled boot was grinding against his gun hand.

Irby Barlow knew then he had bought trouble as well as a brand and he did not want to face it alone. So he offered Dan Roby a partnership. Dan had no money, but his cool nerve and knowledge of cattle were enough for a down payment. They agreed that he would pay the rest out of his share of the profits. Irby had not regretted the deal, even after he saw Dan was determined to beat Les Caton in everything the man tried.

Dan had considered the diamond stickpin his greatest triumph. Caton had apologized for the trouble he caused at the auction, but it was all part of a plan. A week later he challenged Dan to a poker game at the Broken Bottle Saloon. Dan had less than ten dollars on him at the time, and everyone guessed Caton meant to goad him into putting his share of the Snake-in-a-Box into the pot.

But luck was Dan Roby's saddlemate. Caton's game backfired, and before the night was over all his money was piled in front of Dan Roby. It was Dan who issued the final challenge. He offered to bet all he had won against the diamond stickpin Les Caton wore on the front of his yellow silk shirt. To make it more daring, Dan offered to bet on a high card. Luck guided his hand again, and Dan walked out with the stickpin and a handful of greenbacks.

Since Dan knew his own weaknesses, he gave the jewel to Irby Barlow. "You take it as a token of gratitude for the break you give me, Irby. And don't never let me have it back, no matter what I promise. As long as you wear it, everybody in these parts can look at it and laugh in Les Caton's face. It means he ain't as good a man as Dan Roby, and the shame of it will finally run him out."

It didn't take Irby long to realize that Les Caton viewed the wearing of the pin just as Dan had said he would. Every time he walked along Tank Town's streets Irby had to refuse an offer to sell

it back to Les Caton, and each time the man showed more impatience. Finally he told Caton he had lost it. Tonight Caton had raised his price once more, but his interest was already waning. He had not killed Dan Roby because of the diamond alone; he had killed Dan because he was honest and fearless and hard to beat down, and such men were enemies of Les Caton's breed.

Irby Barlow knew this because he had spent the whole day meditating on the special kind of knowledge Dan Roby had called range savvy. Irby had seen little of cactus and sage and nature's secrets, but he had stared out from his teller's cage into the faces of many people. They were his range savvy, and Irby had learned that most men held a strange regard for an honest dollar.

HE WISHED he could discuss his plan with someone, but it would not be wise. A man could call on his father or a friend for a loan, but in some things he had to stand alone. In this country, a man had to prove he could fight his own battles, regardless of the method, before he could have the respect of its men—or women. Stella Dunham had told him that, and the looks from the men in the saloon would always be a reminder.

That was why Irby was hunkered down now in the shadow of a broken-down buckboard beside the livery stable and waiting in the darkness.

It was almost eleven o'clock when he finally spotted Les Caton's white Stetson bobbing along the footpath. Irby left his hiding place and walked out to meet the man. Seeing him, Caton stopped. He stood in a slight crouch, his gun drawn, until he recognized Irby, and then he grunted impatiently.

"What'n hell you doing roaming around out here in the dark?" Caton growled. "I thought maybe it was somebody trying to roll me."

"I was waiting for you," Irby said. "I've been considering your offer and I've decided to let you have the stickpin."

Caton's black brows arched suspiciously, and his thin lips broke into an ugly grin. "I figured a banker couldn't stand such bait as money for long. I could have had it a long time ago if I'd wanted to get tough about it."

Irby Barlow remained silent. He held the diamond in his hand until Les Caton dug a roll of bills from his money belt and counted them. He took the money, handed Caton the stickpin, and walked away with his coat collar turned up high around his ears.

Shortly after noon the next day a rider came into Tank Town on a lathered horse, and swung down in front of the big log house where Stella Dunham had lived with her aunt since her father's death. Stella answered the man's knock.

"I'm Ben Leeper," the rider said breathlessly. "I'm riding for Irby Barlow. He asked me to report in at the ranch today, and I did. There was blood all over the place, and it looks like there'd been a tussle." The man swallowed hard, fumbled along the edge of his boot, and held up a stained Bowie knife. "I found this, but I couldn't find Irby Barlow nc place. I—I think something—"

His voice trailed off, and he caught Stella Dunham's shoulders as the girl's face paled and she appeared about to fall. For a moment Stella leaned against him, breathing rapidly, but she regained her composure quickly. She asked Ben Leeper to wait for her and turned back into the house. When she returned a few minutes later, she was dressed in riding clothes, and her father's tarnished marshal's badge was pinned over the pocket of her calfskin jacket.

"We'll get a posse," Stella said grimly. "We'll find Irby and we'll find his killer."

There were a few who doubted Stella when she claimed she was the town's marshal until the council acted, but it didn't keep them from joining her posse. Dan Roby's death had been an indication of what could happen to the peace they had known so long, and Irby's disappearance emphasized the threat.

Within ten minutes Stella had rounded up a dozen men from the saloons along

Tank Town's main street, and they rode away with loaded guns and determined faces.

They returned at dusk, tired, raw-nerved, and angry. At the Snake-in-a-Box Ranch they had found the scene Ben Leeper described and they had scoured the range for miles without finding a sign of Irby Barlow. But there were a thousand canyons and draws and badlands sinks where a body could be hidden, and they had little hope of visiting them all.

MOST of the men headed for the Broken Bottle Saloon when they returned. Stella rode along with them, reluctant to part from them until morning when they would resume the search. She would never have noticed Les Caton coming along the boardwalk if Ben Leeper had not nudged his mount next to her own and said in an alarmed whisper, "That gent's wearing Irby's diamond stickpin!"

Stella's eyes, which had been fixed wearily on the ground, came quickly alive. She started to call out a command, but it was not necessary. Others had seen the stickpin, too, and guns were already sliding from holsters.

"You're coming with us, Caton!" a man said harshly. "You're going to tell us where you hid Irby Barlow's body!".

Men swarmed around Les Caton like buzzards around a kill, shouting down his protests and taking his gun. They hustled him along the street to the adobe jail. There they lighted a lamp and sat Les Caton under the gleam of it while they formed a threatening circle in the shadows.

Ben Leeper and Clay Broadbent, the towering, hard-faced cattleman who had given Dan Roby his first riding job, talked for the posse.

Broadbent stated the case against Les Caton in a few words. He thumbed back the hammer on his .44 Colt and held it an inch from Caton's nose.

"There ain't but one way you could've got that stickpin," Broadbent said. "I heard Irby Barlow tell you last night at the saloon there wasn't enough money in the world to buy it. You killed him for it, Caton, didn't you?"

"You killed him just like you killed Dan Roby," Ben Leeper added. "Only you hid Irby's body. We want it before we hang you, Caton."

Les Caton's china-blue eyes seemed ready to pop from his face. He tried a weak smile, thinking this might be a joke. "You can't pin nothing on me, boys. I bought this pin. I paid Irby Barlow four hundred—"

Ben Leeper's hand darted out to cuff Caton's white hat off his head. It went sailing across the room, and Caton sprang up in anger. Clay Broadbent planted his boot in the man's middle and shoved him back into the seat.

"I've seen posses string men up with less evidence," Broadbent said. He fished a Bowie from the side of his boot, started trimming his fingernails. "You killed 'em both, Caton. Dan Roby because he made a fool out of you, Irby Barlow because he had something you wanted. You won't get away with it."

Les Caton started to perspire, and he mopped at his cheeks with palms just as wet. His oily black hair dangled toward his eyes, and as the questioning continued, he pawed his head despairingly.

The inquiry held doggedly to the same course, and Caton's answers were just as repetitious.

"You killed 'em both," Broadbent said again and again. "You killed Dan Roby and now Irby Barlow."

Tired sighs came from Caton as the night wore on. "I've told you a hundred times," he said hoarsely. "I bought the diamond."

Broadbent was tireless. He kept his stance in front of Caton, refusing to let him move, and his voice droned with threats and accusations. The oil lamp sputtered and dimmed once, but a man filled it with oil from a spare jug, and the talk went on. Stella Dunham who had watched with as much interest as the

others until exhaustion began to weaken her, finally sat down in a wicker chair and slept. But everyone else was wide awake.

"We been watching you since you came here," Broadbent said after a while. "We didn't like what we saw, but we've been patient. The stickpin cinched the deal, Caton. We're going to swing you for killing Dan Roby and Irby Barlow."

Les Caton clambored to his feet again, his voice high-pitched and wild as he yelled at the posse, "You fellers are crazy! Crazy, do you hear? Sure I killed Roby. I put that knife in him and left him to waller in the dirt, but so help me I didn't lay a hand on Irby Barlow. That was a straight deal! I paid him good money for this diamond. Now let me out of here!"

Clay Broadbent's heavy boot sank into Caton's belly again, shoving him down so hard the chair fell over with him, and the wind went out of him. Caton staggered erect, looking sick.

"We don't care whether you swing for one killing or two, Caton. We'll see you get what's coming to you for killing Roby, and then we'll get to Irby Barlow's killer later."

Les Caton's head sank on his chest, and he groped his way to another chair. He had just realized that his desperation in denying one crime had led him to confession of another.

Broadbent told Ben Leeper and another man to put Caton in one of the cells at the rear of the building, and then he moved over beside Stella Dunham's chair. He shook her shoulder, and the girl came instantly awake.

"Better get some rest, ma'am," he said. "Half the job's done, and we'll get on with the rest of it at daylight."

"The job's finished," a quiet voice said.

EVERY man in the room whirled toward the familiar-looking man who had pushed the jail door open during the excitement of Caton's hysterics and now stood silhouetted against the alkali of the street. Stella Dunham gasped, and Clay Broadbent made a hissing sound between his teeth.

"Irby—Irby!" Stella faltered.

Irby Barlow moved into the circle of light, a sheepish grin on his face. "I'm real, Stella. I'm all right," he said. "I hated to do a thing like this, but I decided it was the only way."

"But all that blood around your place —" Clay Broadbent began.

Irby chuckled. "I slaughtered a beef at the house before dawn and made it as messy as I could. Then I slipped the meat into town and gave it to Pop Lacy over at the livery. He's been hiding me in the hayloft while I waited for this blow-up to come. It's over, isn't it?"

Broadbent nodded. "Yeah. I reckon Caton never done many things honest in his life, and he couldn't bear to have us doubt him. He'd have done anything to convince us that stickpin deal was on the level. All we need now is a marshal to see he gets hung proper, and that nobody else like him moves in here."

The cattleman shoved his hat up and looked at Stella Dunham with his tongue in his cheek. "We've got a right salty one wearing the badge right now."

Irby grinned. "She can't serve though, Clay. She's got some new plans concerning me and the Snake-in-a-Box."

Stella's fatigue evaporated in a warm smile. She walked straight into the circle of Irby's waiting arms to prove he was right. • • •

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THE FABULOUS CAVE

A True Story

By HAROLD HELFER

JAMES BOWIE has come down in history as one of the immortal heroes of the Alamo, but he's also remembered for another reason. Every year scores of people hie themselves into the Texas llano region to look for a lost cave in which the fabulous "Bowie treasure" is supposed to have been deposited.

The treasure is said to have originated in conquistador days. Spaniards had worked silver and gold mines in that region, and story has it that they actually had refined much of the precious ore into bullion cubes. It took 400 jackasses to carry this vast treasure into a storage place in a cave. The Spaniards apparently meant to transfer it eventually to Spain where they would live the grand life of aristocrats.

Before they could remove this treasure, perhaps in anticipation of this happening, the Indians of the Lipan tribe, a crafty lot, revolted and left not a single Spaniard to transfer anything. The fact that later these Indians occasionally showed up at trading posts with chips of silver added fuel to the legend that such a treasure did exist.

But, supposedly on pain of torture by their leaders, no Indian ever revealed where this fabulous wealth was supposed to be hidden. Even alcohol did not loosen their tongues.

This was the situation when James Bowie came along. And adventurer from way back, he was fascinated by the story. A man of action as well as a dreamer, Bowie decided that the only way to find out the location of the treasure was to become a Lipan Indian!

So the adventurer sought out Xolic, chief of the Lipans, and told him he wanted to become a member of his tribe. Not overlooking any bets, Bowie also flirted with Xolic's attractive daughter, who was flattered by the attention of the dashing, virile white man.

After much pipe puffing and considerable ceremony at the Indian camp near San Pedro spring, Bowie was inducted into the Lipan tribe.

Bowie fought with the Lipans against their Indian enemies, went on the buffalo hunts to get their winter meat supplies, and is supposed to have married Xolic's daughter.

One day he is supposed to have been taken to the cave and shown the sight of sights, the glory of glories, all that precious bullion stacked up, row on row, a spectacle so dazzling that he could hardly stand to look at it directly.

Some other man, if this be true, might have elected to play it slowly and safely. But James Bowie wasn't built that way. He promptly rounded up a gang of men and started for the treasure cave, intending to make a direct frontal assault on it. The Indians intercepted them along the way, and a bloody fight ensued. Many were killed on both sides, but Bowie was stopped.

Now, some of these details have been established as true. Bowie did go to live with the Lipans, and the sanguinary battle did take place.

But whether Bowie actually saw the bullion treasure, whether, in fact, the treasure ever existed, is still open to speculation. If Bowie did see the treasure, he never made another try for it. But then, he didn't have the chance. Shortly after the Indian battle, he went to Nacogdoches and joined the band of Texans fighting for the liberation of their territory, and it wasn't too long afterward that he died his hero's death at the Alamo.

Bowie made himself immortal through his connection with this legendary treasure, as well as with the independence of Texas, and the supposed immense accumulation of bullion wealth has become known as the "Bowie mine" or "Bowie treasure."

Myth or fact, the treasure is still being avidly sought by men down Texas way. Grizzled old-timers may tell you it doesn't exist —but, oh, brother if it does! . . ● ● ●

NO TAPS FOR

a novelet

by T. C. McCLARY

CHAPTER I

Whites — Or Apache?

ALL morning long, First Sergeant Shields rode as an island unto himself, beaten by the waves of hatred and contempt that rolled against his back. If Captain Branders had seen this, he would have been delighted by the troubles piling upon the man he despised.

Actually, the roots of the trouble lay two years back. Shields had arrived and enlisted on post and been raised to sergeant within three months by Captain Jeffries — which was too damned fast. Taciturn and contained as he was, Shields had the smell of an ex-officer about him. Not his fists, nor his savagery in battle, nor his fairness, could win him the acceptance and trust of the barracks.

To top things, either from loneliness or by quirk and choice, he had made an intimate of the Apache scout, Ben Cloud. He had treated him as an equal, something for which the bigoted and arrogant troopers held him in contempt.

If he had burned under their disapproval, in time, it might have satisfied them. Instead, he appeared not to give a damn what they thought or said.

He had been a sergeant just a year when Ben Cloud went over the hill with

Everybody hated Shields—but they had to admire his guts!

SERGEANT SHIELDS

"We'd better bury him," Shields said

everything he could take . . . a renegade. The reason for this had been Captain Branders, who had refused Ben Cloud the privilege of calling out his trapped brother for a hand-to-hand encounter and honorable Apache death. Instead, in front of Ben Cloud, Branders had systematically riddled the hostile Apache like a wolf trapped in a pit.

Shields held Ben Cloud's request honorable and fair. Although he did not voice it, he sensed the reason Branders had turned down Ben Cloud's request. Branders was a brutal, sadistic, relentless maniac where Apaches were concerned. If the regulations had let him get away with torture, he would have practiced it. There had been a few times that he actually had. His boots, for instance, were made of particularly fine leather. No animal had ever produced leather like that. An Apache had.

Shields had looked straight at Branders after that massacre and his blue eyes had filled with the chill, still light of accusation. Pale with anger, Branders had to turn away from the contempt of his own sergeant.

He had never forgiven Shields that look. A month later, Captain Jeffries had departed on sick leave, and Captain Branders was post commandant.

BRANDERS chance to even the score with Shields had come in the present matter. All lieutenants were sick or out on patrol. It had been a case of charge and counter charge.

Some white settlers out near the agency claimed they were being rustled by renegade Apache. The agency Apache made the same charge against the whites. Probably both were right, but the army was concerned only with the latest incident.

Captain Branders handed the command to Shields with a hard, malicious smile. "Well, Shields, you'll have your big chance now to act like the officers you're always aping."

He said it loudly enough for it to be repeated through the barracks. Even before the patrol marched out, the men were remembering Shields' officer smell.

Shields had found both whites and Apache still fighting and was bringing in the whole caboodle. But in the melee, both leaders had escaped. There had been no sight of the supposedly rustled cattle at all. But if the sign he had cut was that of the rustled cattle, then in his opinion, the whites were the guilty party.

According to his austere sense of fairness, that gave him no choice but to treat both groups of suspects alike. This had incensed his troop further, especially as the snail's pace march caused by the horseless was slowing their return. Of their own, they'd have found excuse to shoot off a few Apache and mount the white men.

There had been such disgruntlement about the matter that Shields had been forced to give discipline in the field. He had four men returning in their own charge for confinement to quarters. He had two men under arrest and stripped of arms . . . the sharpest rebuke and insult that could be given a fighting man in the field.

So he rode—now still threatened by mutiny, hated by the Apache, detested by the white men, and distrusted by his troops. And if he turned in his report that the rustling showed the work of white hands, Branders would break him the full limit.

Those were the things on Shields' mind and spirit, as they reached the end of the barren tableland. He halted on the rim. Once before in his life, he had let his austere sense of principles and fairness break him. Now he sat out on a point alone, wondering if a man's principles were worth it.

He could still make things right with the settlers and checkmate Branders and throw a sop to his men. All it took was giving the Apache a chance to make a break for freedom, then riding them down and cutting them into ribbons. Guilty or not, these were all bad Apache. There wasn't one who didn't bear a cavalry scar upon his face, or carry some white

man's amulet or token.

A man, a soldier anyway, could justify the action very easily to himself. And his career hung in the balance.

CORPORAL BANGS drifted over, ripping a fresh chew off a sweat-soaked plug of blackstrap. He gestured out at five black specks circling against a molten desert sky. "Now what in hell they see out there? Ain't even a lizard lives out there in summer."

Shields thought of the two escaped leaders who had ducked out of the melee. Their heading into the desert didn't make sense. If they had come this way, they'd be safe just holding the lead they had. Not even desperate men would be fools enough to try a getaway by a desert crossing.

HELL
MOVES TO MONTANA
—*In the next issue!*

Shields shook his head. "Can't be the leaders out there, but I wish I had 'em. White man was Abe Merritt, but the Apache won't tell who their leader is."

"Branders will make 'em talk!" Bangs grinned.

"Or try to," Shields said drily.

"The more they don't talk, the more he'll like it," Bangs said.

"Yes, he'll relish that," Shields agreed on a hard note.

"*Relish?*" Bangs repeated and studied the sergeant cannily. "Now that is a mighty fine word for a man who wound up at this flea-bitten outpost! Officer's English, like you'd say. And command and discipline come mighty easy to you, don't they, Shields?"

Shields flicked him a challenging glance. "Does it worry you, Bangs?"

"Well, yes and no," Bangs confessed. "If you was just an ordinary bank robber or killer before you signed up, that's all right. But there is no love in barracks for a drummed out officer who sneaks back to hide in the ranks."

"What is the difference what a man was?" Shields asked.

"Why, there are two angles there," Bangs grunted. "First, he may be a no-good, lost dog, but he is still thinking down nose at the common soldiers. The more so for having to be one of them. Then no officer is broken without cause. Somewheres, there is a weakness in him, and some time it will crop out. And if it is in line of duty, it is the enlisted men who'll suffer."

Shields pinned him with his gaze. "What weakness are you leading up to, Bangs?"

"Well, you were uncommon quick and ready to lay on harsh discipline yesterday. There is some wonder if you'd be as quick and harsh upon yourself."

The pale lights flared in Shields' eyes. He made a fist and held it in front of him and looked at it. "I'm a sergeant," he said on a leaden, flatted note. "There is my caste, with four knuckle bars for rank on it. Tell the men if they remember that, they'll save a lot of worrying."

Bangs chuckled mockingly. "Well, let's say they'll remember *you were a sergeant!* Those white settlers and Branders ain't begun on you yet."

Bangs spit and wiped his mouth with the back of a muscular, hairy hand. "There ain't much worse for a sergeant than court martial for abuse of authority and false arrest," he commented. "And there ain't much Branders don't know about court martial. It's a hobby of his."

"Then, by God, I'll give him a hobby horse to ride on!" Shields grated. "This rustling job had white man written all over it."

"Trouble is," Bangs said on a low, gruff note, "ain't nobody going to agree with you, sergeant. Not nobody at all, except those renegade Apache."

Bangs whistled a few bars of *Gerry Owen,* and then said, "Command comes high some times, don't it, sergeant?" and chuckled in his throat and swung his horse back to rejoin his troopers.

CHAPTER II

Murderous Trek

SHIELDS reached his canteen and took a drink . . . a carefully measured drink out of long habit, for all that they'd hit fresh water soon. He could hear the deep chested mutter of Bangs' voice behind him. He could feel the anger and contempt of the enlisted men building into something formidable and solid and resistant.

His lips compressed and he watched the circling buzzards. Then he swung his horse and led off down the steep shale trail that dropped off the table to the lowlands. Somewhere at the foot lay Last Spring, last water on the thirty-four miles of trail that hung like a thread against the bleak and sterile hills that bound in Purgatory Desert.

Halfway down the trail, the air turned suddenly burned out and lifeless. Heat rolled off the desert. At the foot of the cliffs, the trail leveled out and lost itself in a sea of throbbing, blinding glare that stripped all color and shadow and third dimension from the landscape.

At a point ahead, Last Spring was a natural basin scooped out under an overhanging shoulder of rock. Shields sharpened and straightened as they approached. He knew by instinct before they got there that the hole was dead.

He laid a hand on his horse's sweat-black rump and half turned in the saddle to call back sharply, "Bangs, alert! Lay a saber side on the first prisoner who bolts."

Bangs snapped, "Sabers out!" and there was the rattling sound of drawing almost in unison. From that brief order, the men knew the story, and the panic that might result.

They came up at the hole and the white settlers stumbled forward and threw themselves down upon the rim. The Apache just squatted for rest with not the slightest interest.

Shields signaled over his scout and had him palaver with the Indians. The scout reported, "They say this spring has been dead three days now. It happens every year at the same time."

Shields' jaws clenched. Had he been supplied officer's field intelligence, he would have known this. Branders, of course, would not lift a sergeant to that dignity. Shields swung afoot and loosened cinches.

"Gather all canteens," he ordered Bangs.

ONE of the white men started a holler. Shields grabbed a short handled pack shovel and told him, "Shut up! Get down there and dig. There still must be water that hasn't soaked up."

The hope stilled the rising panic in the white men. The Indians watched in scornful amusement. They'd picked up some roots and prickly pears, and they hunkered, conserving their energies, and chewed.

The digger petered out and Shields sent down another who simply messed up any hole the first might have made. Shields cursed him out of the hole and stripped to the waist. The troopers watched him with contempt, thinking that he didn't dare order any of them down into that airless sweatpit.

He went down the twenty foot incline and cleared a wide space of the loose sand. This was simply a scooping process. Yet at its termination, he was wet with sweat, sucking for breath.

He rested and dug carefully, building the sides of his hole so that the least possible sand ran back in. A foot down, he came on vestiges of dampness. The sand was darker.

He packed the sides of the hole laboriously and went down another foot, and his hopes sank. The sand was just as it had been, cooler, maybe, but no damper. He sprawled on his belly and went down a third foot, sand biting into every sweat crease of his body.

At three feet, he could judge that even

to get a slow filling seep, he'd have to drive a hole down six or seven feet. There was no way to get a hole that deep. There was no way to shore up the sides. Finally, it would probably take an hour or better for seepage to fill a coffee pot. They'd sweat out more water than they'd find.

But his action had caused a distraction from Bangs' gathering of the canteens, and at least avoided a general melee. The impact of first knowledge was over. The whites just watched him claw back up the pit with grim acceptance of their adverse luck.

Shields came out of the hole quivering in every muscle, gasping, heart hammering, his body spent. He'd have fought an Apache with knives rather than go through that again. Bangs pulled him over the top and sat him down and squatted by him, a canteen and plug of blackstrap ready.

"You could have sent down another prisoner," he suggested. His tone made it clear that Shields could not have sent down an enlisted man. His eyes were both probing and mocking.

Shields took another carefully measured drink and then a chew of the blackstrap. "Fill what canteens you can for measure. Put troops and prisoners alike on ration," he ordered.

His scout came and squatted beside him. "Two riders here before, different times," he said. "One white, one Apache. They find no water. They ride off there." He gestured along their own trail.

Shields thought of the leaders of the two groups whom he'd lost and of the buzzards. It was fantastic that men who knew this country would bust off into that scorching, killing desert. If they had any water at all, and they should have, their best chance was to run the long trail that bent in a half circle around the desert.

On the other hand, it was about thirty-eight miles to Primrose by trail. It was not more than seven or eight, as the crow flies, across the desert. Maybe there was malpais out there hiding ice caves. Conceivably, there could even be a secret spring. Some of these deserts held their secrets well.

BANGS came back with the water count. It would be a thirsty march, but the riders could make it if their horses held out. The trouble would be the walkers. If their feet didn't bust out, their tongues were going to.

Bangs watched Shields grappling with the problem. The corporal's expression was a mixture of rough, ironic humor, and probing curiosity as to the mettle of this man.

The nearest water now was backtrail. Shields could relinquish custody of the white men. Or he could dismount all of the Apaches and mount the whites, and walk the weaker of the Injuns to death, which was nothing that would turn any man's stomach except maybe his own.

There was no other choice that Bangs could see. Conscienceless and callous himself about Indians, he felt a rough-edged satisfaction in watching the sergeant's silent battle between his high toned principles and the harsh, realistic problem that he faced.

Shields sat with his legs splayed out in front of him, his head bent almost to his chest. For a long space, he made no sound except the whistling rasp of his labored breathing. Then his face snapped up and

Sagebrush Sam Says:

There's one thing I've noticed about these riding broncs—the ornery cusses never seem to buck near as hard with the other fellow.

that chill, still look was in his eyes.

He ordered curtly, "Split the troop fore and rear guard. The riders go forward at regular trail pace. The rear guard brings up the walkers, one to a stirrup. All water is with the advance. And you can bet the footers will get there!"

"Their feet won't hold out. Not for thirty-four miles of this blazing trail," Bangs grunted.

"Every relay, walking and riding prisoners will exchange places," Shields said. "If necessary, the troopers will change off with prisoners as well."

Bangs stared at him. "*Troopers walk while Apache ride?*"

Shields put one hand out against the ground and rolled to his feet in a swift and easy movement. "Right now," he said on a metallic note, "I am giving orders, Bangs. Is there any argument?"

"Why, if you are damn fool enough to give that order, you'll get no argument from me!" Bangs snorted. "But maybe the troopers won't feel the same, and I have no doubt that Branders would back them if they committed insubordination."

"We'll see," Shields said sharply.

He stood a moment, feeling the growing mutiny, in the men combining with the savage hatred of the Apache and the vindictive fury of the white settlers. For the second time in his life, he knew the great dark depths of loneliness that can beset a man who stands alone and despised among those he would like as friends.

He clamped his jaws, stiffened his back. He had set out to do something and by God, he meant to do it! He was not compromising, and he was not turning back. And he was not murdering disarmed Apache.

He lifted his arm and swept it forward. No trace of his feelings edged the deep chested bawl of his "Column March!"

HE LED out on point, riding with his scout. From time to time the scout quickened his pace and would get afoot to cut for sign. The scout would return with the same report each time. The two men were still ahead. One of their ponies was laming.

Then the scout stood waiting by his pony. When Shields came up, he pointed off into the desert firepit. "Both fork off here."

The rode a ways off trail to make sure. The desert downtilted here like the sides of a great bowl.

Shields rode back up and hunkered in the scant, breathless shade of his pony. "One white man, one Indian," he repeated to himself. Almost certainly, those were his two missing leaders. And he needed the leaders more than he needed all the rest.

It was not so peculiar that the Apache leader might break away, even if he were innocent of the rustling. He might be wanted for twenty other crimes. But it was damned strange Abe Merritt had dusted off if he were innocent.

The rear guard hove out of the shimmering wall of haze behind. The walking men broke from their stirrup holds and lurched drunkenly forward with hoarse, cackling calls for water.

Shields looked his men over and he could see suspicion and rebellion and truculence rising in them like a tide. They didn't know what he meant to do, but they damned well weren't going to do it. If anybody had been damn fool enough to hit into that breathless scorching sea of heat, let him stay out there and make breakfast for the buzzards.

Shields stood up finally. He stood with his legs spread and planted and his cavalryman's hands locked behind his back. He said on an abrupt, commanding note, "Bangs, I am putting you in command of this detail and the prisoners. At any cost of pride or hardship, you are to get the prisoners through alive. You will make no choice between a prisoner and an insubordinate trooper."

He caught the sharp intake of troopers' breaths, the hard slam of their teeth.

"At first water, you'll send a courier off for post aid." Shields went on, "and bivouac until it gets there."

Nettlement was slowly edging through the temper on men's faces. Gradually, the fact was penetrating their heat and anger that Shields meant to follow those tracks out into the desert himself.

"Now you men," Shields went on, "There is a good idea among you of why I was given this command. Nevertheless, long after I'm forgotten, the Service will remember whether or not men without an officer were able to fulfill their mission and their duty."

He looked them over one by one and let that sink in.

"Any troop that proves itself under these conditions should rate a roseate on its guidon. There is one thing sure, that troop will be talked of through every regiment!"

He watched pride and esprit slicing the anger and temper off of them in layers. Unconsciously, they were straightening. This was a new kind of fight for them, a fight against their own surly natures. But it was a challenge to their pride, and by gawdamighty, if they had to get afoot themselves and hike, they'd get those prisoners through as well as any officer!

Shields looked back at the gaping Bangs. He said, "If you leave two men here, it will give you two more horses. You can send back for them tomorrow."

"What about you?" Bangs half-blurted.

"If I'm not back out by then, I won't be out!" Shields said. He nodded at the pair of horse tracks that ran off into the sea of blazing orange-yellow heat.

He drew to attention and saluted. "Your command, corporal, good luck!"

"Good luck . . . *from you?*" Bangs muttered on a hoarse, cracking note.

He stared at Shields, then swung his narrowed gaze out into the writhing desert heat. A burst of sudden sweat set rivulets cutting the dust film on his rugged face.

He cursed and growled grudgingly, "Shields, I'll have no superior think he can do something that I wouldn't! You have the authority to order me out on that detail."

Shields nodded downward. "You've got bum feet. You wouldn't stand a chance if your horse went down on you."

Bangs cursed him roundly with more friendship and respect than had ever been in his tones. He took out his plug and ripped off a chew. hen he stuck the plug out to Shields.

"Take it with you," he growled. "You may need it as much as water."

He thought a minute for something proper a man could say. He said finally, "You're a dog damned fool, but I will swallow many a hard thing I've said of you. You're a hard man, sergeant, but as hard upon yourself."

CHAPTER III

Into Hell

A GRIM, ironic pride rose in Shields with the stark realization of what lay ahead of him. He hoped, and felt, they understood him now. For the barest instant, he gave way to a man's sentimental thoughts when facing a known end. Short of finding his men and some secret cache of water out there, he could count this as taps for Sergeant Shields.

He thought of another time he had been a fool like this, and it had done nobody any good and been his own undoing in the end. That time had cost him his sword and bars and honor, but he had held his self respect. This was the same general type of thing, but if he came out of this alive, he swore, he'd put practical considerations ahead of the stubborn honesty that seemed to be the mark of Cain for him.

His mouth compressed and he drew a deep lung full of breath, and then dropped over the ridge into the desert heat trap.

Atop the first ridge he turned to look back through the closing wall of burnished glare and writhing heat. The troopers were still lining the trail, the white prisoners craning their necks between them.

Right at that instant, he had more command in absence than at any time of his direct authority. He had an idea that even the vindictive settlers would stop their grumbling for a spell and bend their energies and temper to getting to the end of that dry trail before thirst and their feet began to get them.

There was no trail in a proper sense. Only now and then could he catch sight of a hoofprint. He picked his trail partly by instinct, mostly by letting his horse follow its nose.

He might have passed the dead horse, except that his own horse shied and snorted. He brought himself sharply out of a torpid daze, adjusting his vision to the dim, colorless outline that looked flat as a postage stamp below him.

HE SWUNG down and looked at the horse. It had dropped dead of sheer thirst and heat. But squatting and using the shadow of his hat, he could cut sign on a regular make of human footprints. There were two sets, one boots, one moccasins.

He knew the footprints told a story, but he could not read it. He would have given a good deal to have his half-'Pache scout along.

The moccasin tracks drifted off desertward. The booted man had trailed them a ways, then come back and mounted his own pony, and followed on. His pony was laming, and that was all the story Shields could cut from sign.

He mounted and kept his eye on the rocks to the right of the trail; they were ten times nearer than he'd judged them. He saw nothing there to worry until he saw a flash of light, and heard the flat bark of a rifle as a shot cut between his horse's ears and his chest.

Out of long practice, he dropped on the left side of his horse, spurred it, putting four pistol shots into the rock nest. That one spurt of galloping was all the animal could manage. It slowed instantly and stopped when it got no more spurring.

Shields dropped aground and hunkered under it, damning his stupid actions, for it occurred to him he had only one shot left. He had lightened saddle before he came down into this pit, and his saber, carbine, and all extra rounds were with his saddlebags.

From the hot and throttling shadow of his horse, he studied the dancing rocks. He saw nothing until he caught a glint of sunlight striking metal, and then behind it, he made out the vaguest dark spot.

An Apache voice hailed him. "Trooper, hold your fire! This is Little Blue Cloud . . . I make no war on cavalry."

Little Blue Cloud was Ben Cloud, and Shields reached back through his heat fuzzed memory to match the voices and be sure this was no trick. He called back gruffly, "Then I was your best friend at post, Ben . . ."

"Sergeant Big Fella!" the half civilized half guttural call came back. No mistaking the outright joy in that tone. And few Apache would use the name Ben Cloud had bestowed on Shields.

Shields straightened behind his horse, glad to rise from the fierce slashing impact of the reflected heat along the ground line.

"Come out of that hole, you red devil," Shields half chuckled, half commanded.

"Now Big Fella," Ben Cloud said on a half dismal note, "you not come in here after me?"

Shields vision had adjusted to the space and glare now. He could make out Ben Cloud's form, twisted like a snake's among the rocks. A tough target and a good fort in that shimmering, dancing color-leaching heat.

Ben Cloud had learned cavalry tactics well.

Shields hesitated, then said, "Ben, I came in after some rustlers I missed. If you are one, I'm after you. If you aren't, okay."

"No old time chase?" Ben Cloud persisted. "Big Fella no care about the little things I took?"

Shields laughed outright. "That is Brander's worry! My assignment is strictly rustlers."

A RIFLE clattered down out of the rocks and Ben Cloud followed with an energy in his movement as if this were a nice high, breeze-swept table. He had a pistol in his belt and he never took his beady black eyes off Shields, but he was grinning, and came forward with outstretched hand and pumped the sergeant's furiously.

He turned and pointed across from the rocks. "Abe Merritt," he said. "He make all the trouble. He steal from everybody —whites and Apache—then he make the big trouble, blaming my people."

Shields walked over and looked at Merritt. Ben Cloud had made a sieve of him with bullets, but he had not scalped him, Shields noted, and Abe's body was already stiffening, so Ben would have had time had he meant to. Merritt looked no prettier in death than he had alive. A mean and conniving face if Shields had ever seen one.

Shadows swept lazily overhead and Shields cursed the scavenger birds and grunted, "We better bury him."

"Better no," Ben Cloud said and made a gesture at the desert. Long crawl out. You need sweat."

It was against Shields grain, but it was sense. He went back to his saddle and took the smallest drink he could. He offered the canteen to Ben who shook his head. "Not need yet."

Shields said with some surprise, "Hell, we can be back on trail by midnight."

Ben Cloud looked at him with his tough grained Apache humor. He straightened his hand and held it in the air at a sharp degree. "Steep hill. You been coming all down hill, Big Fella. Back that way, you crawl out. Mebbe."

Even Ben Cloud sounded grim when he said, "Mebbe."

Shields grunted a sound and squinted back into the sea of slowly tinting heat, but made out nothing in the way of landscape.

Ben Cloud was explaining about Merritt. He said, "Him, he rustler. Bad man. My father's people smoking pipe of peace but need war medicine to get back cattle."

Shields nodded. "You're a wanted renegade. You never can make peace while Branders is on post."

Ben Cloud spread his hands and shrugged. "Big Fella, Little Blue Cloud never make peace now." Then he drew himself to attention and proudly touched the yellow bandanna he still wore at his throat. "But Ben Cloud never make war on the cavalry!"

Dry humor touched Shields' stern mouth. "Infantry would be something else, eh?"

Ben Cloud scowled. "Infantry, different tribe."

The Apache swung his body from the waist, first right, then left. His eyes were almost closed, and he seemed actually to taste the quality of heat and glare. "We wait some now," he stated. He gestured to the far side of the desert. "Mebbe we get out that way. One man no, two men, mebbe."

CHAPTER IV

Blood Brothers

SHIELDS eyed him gravely. "If we get out alive, I will still have to take you in for questioning."

The Apache looked like an inscrutable child. "But I do nothing, Big Fella, except try to get back my people's cattle! You can see for yourself. They are in Blue Grass Canyon with fresh, run over brands, Abe Merritt's."

"Branders will grab you on the old charge, then," Shield pointed out.

He saw the hatred break and smolder in Ben Cloud's eyes. But the Apache had something in mind. He said, "Me worry when time come."

Shields loosened his cinch and bridle and Ben Cloud trudged off behind the rocks and reappeared with Merritt's lame horse. The animal was wall eyed and gaunted. It wouldn't last the night out. It set Shields wondering why Merritt

had come into that desert.

Ben Cloud he could figure, both on the score of running away, and of his reason for daring this inferno. The Apache was a wanted man. His pony was already playing out when he hit the dry spring, and he didn't have enough water to hike the long trail, and afoot and thirsted, he might be overtaken. For him, the desert was at least the most honorable, if not the better risk. Death on the desert was preferable for an Apache to the humiliation of jail.

Abe Merritt was a different matter, and he asked about it. He saw the quick film drop over Ben Cloud's eyes, he noted the hesitation before the Apache answered.

The Apache said finally, "Mebbe him not want to get questioned same time as my people. He low on water and find spring dry. His horse laming, he can't get off long trail before you catch up. Then he see my sign going into desert, and he figure I have water and a good horse, so he follow."

It was a cooked up story, and Shields knew it, and Ben Cloud knew he knew it. But it was the story he was telling officially, and he'd stick to it, and Shields could take it or doubt it as he wanted.

He found he was straining to piece together the picture, and the simple strain of thinking in this heat was costing him strength he'd badly need.

He saw a thin, grey film of shadow spreading off the rocks, and he led his pony over and hunkered, getting what rest he could. He took a chew of Bangs' tobacco and gave Ben Cloud the plug, and folded his arms across his knees and dozed.

Ben Cloud's iron fingers on the back of his neck shook him groggily awake. Ben Cloud took a finger, just one finger, of water and rubbed Shields' temples. "Time we go," the Apache said, and pulled him erect.

Shields shook his head and swallowed a few times and found his throat felt filled with rust. The quid was still in his mouth and he chewed on it.

"How far?" he asked. "How long?"

Ben Cloud pointed out a rambling trail. "Not far in miles, Big Fella. Mebbe ten. Damn tough pull though."

"How long?" Shields repeated.

"Lucky, mebbe sunup," the Apache said. He made a fatalistic gesture. "Not soon then, not never," he added briefly.

"No water, no ice, on this desert?" Shields asked suspiciously.

"No water," Ben Cloud said. He was lying, but there were tribal secrets that could not even be divulged in friendship. In friendship, he'd done the next best thing he could. He'd ridden Merritt's horse out to water and filled their three canteens.

Merritt's horse must have drunk, but it had done the poor animal's spirit little good. It stood near by with its head drooping and its lame leg resting on the edge of one hoof. A long drink would have done Shields horse plenty of good. That Ben Cloud had not ridden that one indicated the kind of trail that must guard the secret of that water.

EVENING had finally struck the desert. Pastel light had washed out the brash burning glare of high sun and now the hot brown haze was drawing back like a slowly outgoing tide.

Out of habit, Shields inspected their equipment and horses. This was when he saw through Ben Cloud's lie about the water. His own canteen was brimming. Ben Cloud's, the same. The third canteen held enough water to slosh, but it was light. Three quarts was not much of a drink for a thirsted horse, and Ben Cloud had watered the cavalry remount.

Shields took a measured drink, and cursed, and drank again. "That was an Apache horse," he grunted then, "and it could get along without the water."

"The Apache can get along without many things but pride, Big Fella," Ben Cloud said simply.

Shields took a third drink, and could still feel his thirsted body soaking the water up before it even settled. He corked the canteen. He inspected the horses and sharpened at the condition of

the poor one's hoofs.

"What did you do, run him over razors?" he demanded.

The Apache looked innocent. "Mebbe Merritt."

Shields looked off into the thinning haze but could cut no sign of what he sought, a field of white, knife sharp, salt windrows. There'd be no trail through there of course. The Apaches were far too wise. He had the curious wonder of how some ancestor had found it in the first place and survived to tell.

Ben Cloud pulled up onto Merritt's horse and Shields swung into saddle. He glanced over at Merritt's body and jerked his face away from the scene. The big, lumbering, filthy, hissing birds had already dropped for their orgy of abomination.

He said thickly, " Let's ride."

The light was changing now in swift waves of tone. The landscape was forming in vivid color out of the receding haze.

The horses could travel no more than five minutes without stopping. The lowest stones slowed them, the effort of the slightest grade set them to straining and quivering in every muscle.

A grunt from ahead broke into Shields' thoughts and he drew rein sharply to keep his horse from bumping into Ben Cloud as the Indian jumped clear of his falling pony. It had pitched forward right in mid stride, and now it sprawled there, heartless, but not yet dead, looking at them reproachfully.

Shields started to draw his pistol, thought better of it, and told the Apache, "Better shoot it."

Ben Cloud's hand went to his pistol, but he did not draw it. He said after a moment, "Coyotes come onto the desert at night. We may need the bullets."

I ain't got no use for WOMEN

The girl was young and pretty
Like a little prairie flower,
But her eyes were scared and teary
For she'd waited for an hour
For the minister to get her
And to take her to the town.
The stage had gone and left her
And the dark was gaining ground.
Waal, old Rocky was a cowboy
That had never seen a girl
Who could give his heart a tumble
Or could set it in a whirl.
But when Rocky saw her sitting there
So small and in a jam
He knew he couldn't leave her, so he said
"Excuse me, ma'am,
I guess the preacher's busy;
I expect he must a been
A savin' some pore waddy
From the awful path of sin.
But I reckon I can take yuh
If you'll come along with me;
My pinto'll carry double
And the transportation's free.
Here, I'll h'ist yuh to the saddle;
He's a kinda pesky hoss;
Ain't got any use for women—
Guess he gets it from his boss."
Well, the lady kept so quiet
In the creaking leather seat
That old Rocky got to thinking
She was loco from the heat.
But she glanced around a second
And his eyes looked into hers
Then a funny feeling got him
Like his heart was full of burrs.
Well, before they got to Collins
Where she went to be the teacher
Rocky knew that something happened—
Something calling for a preacher.
He had seen those lips like cherries
And he told the waddies later
That it only took one kiss from them
To cure a woman hater.

—Cecile Bonham

Shields nodded at the down pony. "You've had no rest in riding those nags, Ben. Better we swap off and on."

Ben hunkered and tore at the tobacco Shields had given him. "Long pull, your horse go down too," he muttered. "Better we both walk." He looked speculative, as if he might be thinking of the end of the crossing, if they made it, and of Branders. He looked up at Shields, "We still good friends, here, on desert, anyway?"

Shields made fists of his hands and knocked the fronts of his wrists together. "Blood brothers!"

Ben Cloud nodded satisfaction and came erect. From some part of his mixed Indian and army clothing he pulled a small possible bag.

"We shuck weight now," he stated. "We put our guns in here and let the horse carry. But that saddle too much weight. You rig a circingle with stirrups out of the picket line we need."

He dropped his own gun, and on second thought, his knife, into the possible bag and handed it to Shields. Then he set about unsaddling. Shields hesitated, trying to probe what might lie in that mysterious half savage mind, then shrugged and dropped his own gun in and pulled the mouth of the bag shut.

THEY rigged a circingle, made fast the stirrups and slung on the canteens and the bag. They looked to themselves next, lightening of whatever they did not need.

They cached the saddle and extra gear and each grabbed a stirrup and began to trudge. Oftener and oftener they stopped to blow. More and more their steps were lurching. Every sweat crease in Shields' body was raw. His feet were swollen near to bursting and he was sucking breath through teeth that fatigue and tension had nearly locked.

They wound through boulder fields and twisted over wind carved buttes and hard rock ridges by some sixth sense of Ben Cloud's that was sharper, even, than the horse's. Dusk turned into nightshade and the sea of stars above them shimmered and cast down their pale blue glow, but around their feet, all was darkness, and even the horse was stumbling now.

They staggered onto a sea of cracked and checkered hardpan. The horse stumbled and lurched but caught itself, but Shields sprawled out and the impact on his tired, stiff body was like falling off a twenty foot ledge.

Ben came around and helped him up and said, "We wait for moon, now. You need drink?"

"What about you?" Shields rasped hoarsely.

"I wait for after nap," the Apache said.

Shields swallowed hard and rasped, "Then I wait too."

He was asleep where he sprawled almost instantly. Maybe it was two hours later when the Apache shook him. Gold-red light was rising in a dome-like glow beyond the ink black line of the hills. Ben said, "We move a little now but wait for moon."

Shields fought himself awake and flexed his muscles. They had water and chewed coffee beans, and then tobacco.

"How far now?" he asked the scout.

"Mebbe seven mile," Ben told him.

"Good God!" Shields muttered. He was considered a tough man on trail but he felt now as if he'd been riding rock and desert for three weeks solid. Only three miles covered and they were already half beat.

"We change off at the horse's head now," Ben said. "This hardpan not wide, but very bad." He made sign language with his hands, depicting steps and sides higher on one side of a crack than on the other.

They put their problems from mind then. They hunkered there with the desert still breathing off day's soaked up heat all around them.

Shields said once, "Think Merritt knew there was water out here?"

Ben Cloud made no direct answer that would be an admission. But he said, "It was not water he was after. It was gold."

The answer struck like a bell in Shields'

curiosity, but it was too hot for detailed, labored talk. In any case, if the Apache wanted him to know more, he would tell him. Ben Cloud was following out some pattern of his own in the items and facts he mentioned in connection with Merritt or the rustling. He was trying to let Shields read the picture without actually being told.

A blood red moon rolled up out of the hills. Ben Cloud waited until he could see shadows on the desert floor. He came erect and nodded. "Watch your feet. I take the horse first spell."

Ben Cloud moved to the animal's bridle and they started out. It was rough, laborious going, the animal moving stiff legged and tense, afraid of cracks too small to give off the updrafts and smells that are half of a horse's night sight.

They rested and made their half-expressed comments, resting their minds too from the crushing grind of their problem. Ben Cloud grunted abruptly out of some trend of thought. "That Abe Merritt no damn good. He try to use hostile Apache and don't tell what else he is doing and when I find out, he use the same men on us he rob."

Shields sharpened and felt the picture of things begin to form within his mind. He said, "I will still have to report the killing, Ben." He frowned. "And you can expect damn little fairness from Branders." And then, there is the old charge, still."

The Apache's eyes were a smoldering glow against the darkness. After a long space he said, "Big Fella, I have gold back of those rocks where you found me. You let me go when we get out. I rest and then I go back with a good horse and bring the gold and pay the Army for what I took."

"I'll give you the money to pay for what you took," Shields told him. "But I will have to take you in for questioning, Ben Cloud."

"You no more my brother?" Ben Cloud asked.

"Yes, I am your brother," Shields said. "I will take your side as far as I am able. If you pay your theft and fine, that helps. When they find the cattle with Merritt's brand, that should clear you."

Then he added as a somber warning, "If you can explain why Merritt was after you. And I would forget about the gold, Ben Cloud."

Ben Cloud grunted and scratched at the ground. "Branders," he muttered fiercely. "He should have let me fight my brother. Now we both be dead and happy together hunting and making war like Apache should."

Shields make no answer. What answer could a white man make to the savage thinking of an Apache? Ben Cloud had meant his request when he made it, and he meant what he said now. He would have called out his own brother and fought him hand to hand to the death, and both of them would have fought like demons, and yet it would in no wise have affected the strong bond and love between them.

CHAPTER V

Death Duel

THEY pulled to their feet finally, and plodded up the long roll of a land-swell. The white sand dunes glowed in the moonlight right ahead of them. Enormous piles of sliding, clutching, still-hot sands, reaching up sixty, and as high as three hundred feet.

They stopped to blow and stared at the treacherous sea of silver white. Ben Cloud pinched himself brutally to sharpen his hazing senses. He studied the field with the eyes of a cat.

"The horse," he said, "will try to pull us into the valleys. Big Fella, if we craze out, keep *climbing* even if you go loco."

Shields nodded grimly and they gave each other the smallest touch of water. They shook hands then, out of some unspoken impulse. They set their jaws and put the horse straight at the first sand dune.

In his whole life, Shields had never fought like that. He fought the sliding sands, and he fought his feet, and he fought to hold direction, and he fought his body up every time he fell down.

They tumbled out of the sand dunes in the first smudged gray light of dawn. All three of them, the two men and the horse, lurching drunkenly, rushing forward half-crazed but crazily joyous. They sprawled out on a roll of lava with the canteen between them, half snarling, half crying, and reaching for moral strength to each other.

Shields drew the cork of his canteen, and with quivering hands and fighting his own thirst like nothing holy, held the canteen to the scout's mouth and gave him a drink. Once there, once to himself, and back and forth three times, and never in the whole world had there been a sweeter drink.

"There is trouble here now," Ben Cloud said. "We must cross a canyon."

Actually, the canyon was only a crack, but there was no way around and most of its reach was a good twelve feet. Ben Cloud moved directly along its edge until he found an outcropping where the span was not more than three feet.

A scant yard! Shields thought, but they stood looking at it and judging their muscles and their energy and Shields said grimly, "A helluva long jump, Ben, when a man is thirsty."

Somehow, they made it—just as the sun jutted up and a fresh day's heat rushed in a tide over the horizon. The lava heated fast, and its surface was cracking the horse's hoofs, and both men were long since walking almost on bare feet. They had to crawl up the last lava rise on hands and knees.

And then they yelled a wild and cracked, cackling sound, for there was no down pitch . . . just plain sandy, sterile earth lay ahead of them, uptilting in an easy grade to low cliffs that marked the desert's edge.

They pushed forward now, fevered, clawing and staggering and lurching ahead with men's last monomania, to reach their goal even if they die when when they get there.

It was almost high sun when they reached the cliffs, scant chalk bluffs running as low as eight feet.

There was air up here. There were a couple of stunted trees and brush. There was a seep hold that held maybe three gallons of water. The Apaches had picked this crossing well.

The horse ploughed straight for the smell of water, and the three threw themselves at it, heads knocking together, They drank and crawled to shade and slept.

It was nearing sundown when Shields came to a beaten man's first sharp wakefullness. He sat up and saw the horse cropping buffalo grass nearby. Ben Cloud was just rising from the spring.

Ben Cloud gave a burned man's grimaced grin and came over and slashed away Shields' useless boots. He had already repossessed himself of his gun and knife. But the possible bag was still hanging from the horse, and it hung heavy with the weight of Shield's own gun.

It was hot, even on this edge of a table, but after the desert, it was like a cool patio. Days heat was already lifting off this land, and a light breeze was playing down over the sharp slope of the table.

Shields crawled to the seep and had a fresh drink and felt strength begin to flow back into him. He bathed his swollen legs and cut and blistered feet. He climbed painfully erect and hobbled to his horse, and giving it a word and rub, got his postol. He examined it from habit, and it was just as it should be. The hammer lay right over his last shot.

Hoofbeats pulsed on the air and then drummed vaguely upon the distance. He squinted up grade and watched a column of cavalry come over the hill from the direction of the post. It brought matters to a head, and his black burned and broken lips compressed while he thought matters out.

He said to Ben Cloud with gloomy bitterness, "You should have dusted, Ben. You had the chance."

The scout looked hurt and surprised. "With you asleep and mebbe need help still? But I go now, Big Fella."

Shields cursed to himself. He looked at Ben Cloud, and then he looked at the distant column, almost masked against the hill. But he knew the signs, the spacing out of riders. That was no ordinary patrol. Branders himself was coming. Branders and some other officer riding abreast of him.

He looked back at Ben Cloud. He said grimly, "Ben, if you're in the clear on that rustling, you are better off as my prisoner until this is straightened out."

The Apache shook his head. "Not yours, not Branders, Big Fella. Nobody ever take Little Blue Cloud living."

SHIELDS sucked a deep breath through set teeth and stiffened. "Ben," he said, "you're guilty as hell of raiding the white settlers. You were selling out to Merritt. But then you found Merritt was raiding your people and selling to the whites, and you caught him with a mixed herd, drove him off, hid the herd, and then got tangled in a fight."

The Apache grinned with liking. "Big Fella always smart fella!" he chuckled. "You report. But I go now."

Shields said with difficulty, "Ben, I can't let you. You're under arrest."

"To bad," Ben Cloud said, and his gun was in his hand. No slightest tinge of hatred glittered in his eyes, but no least softness was in his warrior face. Friendship was one thing, fighting something else. When it could be on the same side, fine. Otherwise, bad medicine, but a man still fought.

Shields grated through his teeth with desperation, "Ben, there must be an inspecting officer here. Branders wouldn't ride abreast of anyone below his rank. You pay up damage with your gold and maybe we can still straighten this out."

"Sorry, Big Fella," Ben told him and started to move warily toward the horse. "I have to borrow," he said. "This is your favorite, so I leave him in Blue Grass Canyon where you'll find him when you go for cattle."

Shields teeth grated once, then he threw himself sidewise, reaching out his own gun in the movement. Both guns barked at the same instant. Ben Cloud bucked, stiffened, bent slowly backward, and then pitched sidewise to the ground.

Shields threw down his smoking gun and ran to him with a lumbering gait. He turned the Apache upon his back; he was still conscious, but the blood was spreading right beneath his heart.

He was done.

Shields cursed. Wetness flowed across his eyes. He cursed himself, he cursed the cavalry, he cursed his god.

Ben Cloud shook his head weakly and managed a twitching smile. "Everything all right, Big Fella. Fair fight. I die from hand of damn good warrior. I meet my brother and have some fine hunting soon."

He flicked his gun off his finger, and laboriously reached to his waist. His jeweled belt was famous. It had come down clean from Aztec days. He unlatched it and drew it out from under him and pushed it into Shields' hand.

"Not coup, but gift of friend, Big Fella," he muttered. He pressed Shields' hand.

Then he called in Apache upon his tribal gods, and put a curse on Branders with his last breath.

His body seemed to sag in upon itself after that.

Shields folded his hands upon his chest and stood up. He lumbered over to pick up his gun as Branders' harsh voice drew the column to a halt. Branders came out of the saddle and came striding across the ground. Shields saluted and said, "Sergeant Shields reporting from patrol, sir."

"A fine looking specimen of a sergeant!" he snapped. "But maybe we can correct that before long!"

He glared down at the dead Apache and his whole face contorted with frustration. "Dead, and shot on the scene! Shields, I hope you have a good explanation for this!"

"Yes sir," Shields said. "He was the leader of the rustlers, but under Abe Mer-

ritt. He attempted to break arrest and depart on an army horse holding a cavalryman under point of gun."

"How did he come to get possession of that gun, sergeant, after you had placed him under arrest?" Branders asked coldly.

Another officer strolled over. A very slight and dapper officer with carefully tended, iron gray hair. A fop of a staff officer, if you didn't look closely. But if you looked close, you saw the rapier steel of the man.

Branders made an emphatic gesture at the dead Apache. "A renegade ex-scout, and one worth twenty others to get alive. But this man let him get his hands on a gun, and then shoots him dead." He wheeled on Shields. "Why didn't you let him ride so we could catch him and hang him by the heels?"

The chill, still lights sprang up in Shields' blue eyes. "Possibly, sir, from a sense of duty and loyalty to the Service," he replied.

Except for the other officer's presence, Branders looked as if he would have struck the sergeant. The other officer was noting details. He was an Adjutant General's colonel. He picked up the Apache's gun and broke it. The one shell was still hot, the others cold.

He looked the gun over and noted its serial number. He looked at the dead Apache carefully. "Still wearing the Service yellow," he noted of the bandanna. "Was that in defiance or in sentiment?"

"Well, sir, he never turned his guns on the Cavalry," Shields murmured.

"I'll do the answering here, Shields!" Branders barked.

THE colonel looked around at Branders coolly. He said, "With your permission, captain, it is your sergeant I am questioning. You have already mentioned charges against this man. I would like to hear what he has to say."

Branders turned brick red and swung away.

"You don't consider his putting a gun on you the same as the Cavalry, sergeant?" the A.G. officer went on.

"Well, yes and no," Shields said uncomfortably. "It is hard to explain. One reason was that we were friends. Otherwise, he'd not have waited. He was awake first and could have been away. The other reason was that his need to escape was desperate."

"I see," the colonel murmured. He strolled over and took Shields' gun from his hand and breaking it, felt the bullets. "Of course," he said, half to himself. Then his gaze lifted with a snap directly on Shields and his eyes looked like silver bullets. "One or the other of you, sergeant, could have had possession of both guns. Were both carried in that possibles bag?"

"Yes, sir," Shields acknowledged. "As I said, Ben Cloud was a friend. He awakened first and took back his own gun."

"And left yours?"

"Yes sir. You don't steal a friend's weapons. Not even an Apache."

"If he was a friend, he must have known you'd not forsake your duty, Shields, as it seems quite clear you didn't."

"I suppose he did, sir."

The colonel nodded. "I think that is sufficient so that we will accept your word, face value, at the inquiry." He looked thoughtful a space. "With a white sergeant friend on post, what made this Apache turn renegade?" he asked finally.

Shields looked right through him. He said through his teeth, "You will have to ask Captain Branders about that, sir! I knew Ben Cloud as a brave scout and loyal to his guidon. That is all I can say."

Branders came back over, his temper checked. He said, "Colonel, with my apologies, this is wasting time. I sent this man out to find a band of rustlers and round them up, and also find their cache. By the skin of his teeth and by disregarding a commander's duty, he found the leaders, but he still did not find the cattle, nor solid evidence except by his own say-so, and he is guilty of false arrest of honest settlers, and there is going to be hell to pay."

"The cattle," Shields told him, "are in Blue Grass Canyon over-run with Abe Merritt's brand. You will find both settler and Apache cattle, which should satisfy the settlers on why I put white men into custody. It was a white man stole them, the Apache cattle, and the man was ordering a white-trained Apache to rustle the settlers."

Branders jaws clamped. Give the settlers back their cattle and prove Abe Merritt was their real enemy and Abe was dead, and they'd be pounding Shields' back as if he were their hero.

Shields started to mention the gold, then thought better of it. The gold had come from Abe Merritt alone. It could be used by Ben Cloud's impoverished and agent-bilked family.

The colonel was leaning to examine an end of the Apache's belt that had flopped out from Shields' torn shirt. "A fine piece of workmanship, sergeant," he commented. "Is that coup?"

"No sir, a gift of friendship."

Shields jaw hardened and his mouth went tight as he said it. The colonel looked at him gravely and out of his deep knowledge of cavalry and Apache, and men torn between principles and friendship, he read most of the story.

He said, "One more question, sergeant . . . eh . . . is it Shields, they call you?"

Shields flamed under his almost black burn.

Humor was a lurking light in the colonel's drill eyes. "What," he asked, "would you have done if you'd not caught up with the Apache?"

"Why, probably died, sir, in pursuance of duty, I suppose."

The colonel nodded, as if reaching some inward, silent judgment. "Better death than being broken, is that it, sergeant?"

Shields swung his face and looked down at the Apache. "Yes sir, I suppose that is it," he admitted.

"But better honor than either," the colonel murmured for Shields' ears alone. "I think when I leave, Sergeant, I will request your company back to Departmental Headquarters. There was an officer once whose actions appeared too self sacrificing to be believed. I think I can see now how it might not be an act of sacrifice, but one of solid, disciplined principle."

Shields' jaws were set too hard to answer. All he could do was finger the end of Ben Cloud's belt, and when the colonel nodded, salute. To the side, he could see the angered frustration of Captain Branders' brutal face.

There'd be no taps for Sergeant Shields. But there'd be tribal tomtoms and a warrior's burial for Ben Cloud. ● ● ●

HE WAS TOUGH—SHE WAS SEXY!

The Texas gunmen around the Circle N bunkhouse were wolves, and rough Jim Westport almost went wolf, too—when he met up with their redheaded young lady boss!

ONE RANGER—ONE REDHEAD

By LEE FLOREN

Featured novel in **POPULAR WESTERN** *Now on sale—25¢!*

Without stopping to figure the odds, Eddie pulled his gun

The HURRY-UPPERS

By BEN FRANK

Piano-playing Eddie Bell was fast at almost everything—especially getting into trouble!

EDDIE BELL was the kind of young man who never wasted any time to speak of, making up his mind or getting into action.

When word reached him that the Farlings had taken up a homestead some place near Lobo Junction, he went into his lonely two-roomed ranch house and stood for about six seconds with his big brown hands in his pockets, remembering back to when he was a boy.

A little town in Missouri The Farlings, next door neighbors. Betty Farling, a twelve-year-old kid then, with ash-blond hair and laughing blue eyes. Eddie had been fourteen that year when his pa had taken a sudden notion to move to Wyoming.

Funny how the dream had been with him for so long. A dream with Betty the important part of it—and now, here she was, practically a next-door-neighbor again. Fifty miles away, of course, but what was fifty miles?

A rusty-headed, quick moving rannie, he hurried over to the old piano, sat down, and began to play some dream music. It was his mother's piano, the one thing she'd insisted in bringing from the old home in Missouri. Now his mother and father were both dead, but the old piano was still here, helping him think things out, driving away loneliness.

"Why not?" he said, making up his mind just like that.

Three days later, he tied his roan saddle horse in front of the Cattlemen's Saloon in Lobo Junction, hitched up his gun belt a notch, and walked into the place. Somebody here, he'd reasoned, could tell him how to find Abe Farling's homestead.

The first thing he saw was the piano, and it drew him across the room like ice cream draws a kid. Then the tenseness in the smoky, sour-smelling dive got through to him, and he faced around to have a good look at things.

There was going to be a fight—he knew that instantly by the expressions on the white faces in the room—a shooting fight, and somebody was going to get himself killed. Eddie stood there by the battered piano, a square—shouldered rangy man, with a sudden hard glint in his eyes. He'd savvied the set-up in his hurry-up way.

A man and a boy. They stood at the rough pine bar, facing each other. The man, a big ugly jasper with a beefy face and thick shoulders was all set to kill the kid who faced him.

The kid carried his six in an awkward position for a quick draw. From his patched overalls, faded cotton shirt, and clodhopper shoes, Eddie guessed that he belonged to a poor sodbuster family. The big ugly cuss wore a bone-handled six and a silver studded belt and had cattleman stamped all over him.

Anyway you looked at it, it was none of Eddie's business. But he liked the way the kid faced the big coyote. The kid had a good clean jaw and a steady eye, and Eddie suddenly knew he was on the kid's side. Maybe, because the kid didn't have a chance.

"Kid," the big man said furiously, "you better start pullin' your gun!"

It still wasn't any of Eddie's business, but he drew his own gun and leveled it. "Let's kind of cool off over there," he said tersely.

For the first time, the men noticed him; and the big cowman changed his mind about killing the kid. He started to say something flavorable and changed his mind about that, too. Suddenly looking scared, he turned and walked out of the saloon, his silver spurs jingling like Santa Claus sliding down a chimney.

Eddie grinned and asked, "Anybody else want to take up where that gent left off?"

NOBODY wanted to. Eddie put up his gun, sat down at the piano, and began to play softly. For a few seconds he was back with his dream but not for long. Looking up, he saw the sodbuster kid staring at him. He gave him a grin, and the kid managed to grin back faintly. Then the men in the room relaxed and one, a short, pot-bellied hombre edged up and held out a soft, fat hand.

"Son," he said in a friendly manner. "it's been quite a spell since I heard anyone play a piano like you do. Or call Prod Pierce's bluff. I'm Doc Jones."

Eddie shook hands with Doc. "I missed out on the start of the trouble," he said. "Hope I didn't side with the wrong man."

"To my way of thinking, you didn't," Doc said positively. "It's the same old story—settlers against ranchers. A fight's been brewing between By Holly's Box H and the homesteaders ever since Prod Pierce came here to ramrod the old man's ranch."

"And the kid?"

"The kid who stood up to Prod—Where's Tommy?"

"He skedaddled," someone said.

"Anyway, Tommy's pa, Abe Farling, is the head man at the settlement, and Prod knows he's got to run the Farling's out before he can chase away the rest of the homesteaders."

Eddie's heart began to bounce hard and fast against his ribs. Maybe this thing had

been some of his business, after all.

Settling his hat, he hurried out into the sunny street. Prod Pierce had vanished, but the kid was waiting for him. Looking at him now, Eddie could see some resemblance between Tommy at eighteen and the little kid he remembered.

"Thanks, mister," Tommy said. "I guess I was a fool to call that skunk's bluff, but I got tired of being pushed around." Then he grinned uneasily. "Maybe if you knew the setup here, you wouldn't have sided me. You look like a rancher yourself."

"Guess you don't remember me," Eddie said. "Years ago, my mother gave your sister, Betty, piano lessons, and—"

"Eddie Bell!" Tommy hollered. "Gosh all hemlock!" . . .

SURE, Betty had changed; but the ash-blond hair was the same, and so was the mischievous twinkle in her blue eyes. Medium tall, blushing a little, she stood there in the doorway of the small house, smiling up at him.

"Eddie," she said in an awed voice, "it's kind of a miracle, isn't it? In a world as big as this and after almost ten years, you riding up to our home like this?"

"Yeah," Eddie agreed huskily. "I reckon it is!"

Later, supper over and the work done, they settled down in the small front room of the house to talk over old times. But Eddie hated to waste time just sitting and talking. He wandered over to the old square piano that filled one end of the room, sat down—and suddenly had a bad case of stage fright.

Funny thing, for years he'd dreamed of playing music for this girl, and now that she was standing beside him, his fingers had turned to sticks. Likely he would have ruined his musical reputation for good and all if there hadn't come a sudden clatter of hoofs.

Abe leaped to his feet and hurried outside. A moment later, he rushed back into the room, his gaunt face grim and gray in the lamplight.

"That was Bill Ott's boy," he said hoarsely. "Some night riders have fired his pa's barn. I'd better go over there. Tommy, take the rifle, climb up into the old cottonwood and keep a lookout. We don't want the Box H to burn us out!"

He went lumbering out of the room. Tommy caught up a Winchester and ran outside. Eddie and Betty followed and stood beside the house, watching Tommy shinny up the big old cottonwood that shaded the front yard.

"At first," Betty said in a hollow voice, "everything was all right between us settlers and Mr. Holly. But a few months ago, his nephew came to boss the Box H. That was when the trouble began."

"It's against the law for a man to burn other folks' buildings," Eddie said indignantly. "Why don't—"

"Sure," Betty cut in tiredly, "but knowing who's behind this lawlessness and proving it in court are two different things. These men ride at night. They're like ghosts. They strike silently and then disappear—and another building or a haystack is destroyed."

Hours later, Abe Farling returned home, his face fire-blackened and with the smell of pine smoke strong upon him. He slumped wearily down on a chair.

"We saved the house and some outbuildings," he said bleakly. "But a team and a cow was caught in the barn. John Fergus fell off the roof of the house and busted a leg. And his wife with another baby on the way!" His big fists knotted. "If we could only catch one of 'em—get some proof that the Box H is doing this to us." He slumped deeper into the chair, exhausted and grim.

Eddie went over to the piano again. This time he didn't have stage fright. As he played, he saw Abe slowly relax. Then he glanced at Betty. He saw that her eyes were misty and knew that his music was good.

Right off, he made up his mind. Some way he was going to end this feud between the Box H and his friends.

THE next morning, he helped Abe and Tommy do the chores and harness their teams. Then he stood with a shoul-

der against the barn, watching them head toward the fields of green corn. When he faced around, he saw Betty standing beside the small house, the wind whipping her dark skirt about her slim, bare legs. She was a sight worth looking at. She was his dream girl, all right, but at the moment, he had other things on his mind.

"Guess I'd better be heading for home," he said.

Looking at him as if she didn't want him to leave, she said, "You'll come again, won't you, Eddie?"

"If you want me to," he said.

"I want you to," she said, smiling.

There was more to be said, but as usual he was in a hurry to get things done. He grabbed her and gave her a kiss before she knew what was going on. Before she had time to make up her mind whether to box his ears or kiss him back, he was on his way to the barn for his roan.

He rode back to Lobo Junction. He wanted to talk things over with old Doc Jones, but Doc was busy. Being in his usual rush, Eddie inquired about the shortest way to the Box H and left town without seeing the old medico.

It was close to noon when he rode up to the Box H ranch house and found old By Holly sitting in the cool shade of tall irrigated maples. Hunkered down with his broad back against a tree was Prod Pierce. Seeing Eddie, Prod got to his feet, scowling.

"That's the jasper I was telling you about," he said to the old man out of the corner of his ugly mouth.

Eddie slid to the ground and stepped toward the old man. Old By just sat there, his shrewd gray eyes studying Eddie from head to foot. If he liked what he saw, he didn't let on.

"So you're the man who kept my nephew from getting himself mixed up in a killing," he growled at last.

"Maybe," Eddie replied. Then he decided in a hurry how he would play this game. "Got to thinking afterwards," he said, "that I might have stuck my nose into something I shouldn't have."

Rolling a smoke, he waited for somebody to make the next move.

"I would've killed that fool kid," Prod said at last, "if you hadn't butted in. That might have turned out bad for me."

Eddie didn't add anything to that. Things seemed to be moving along satisfactorily. He squatted down against a tree and began to chew on a blade of grass.

"What'd you come here for, son?" the old man asked.

"I figured maybe I could get a job here," Eddie replied.

With a groan, the old man shoved to his feet. He was an undersized, white-headed oldster, badly crippled with rheumatism.

"Prod's the boss," he said. "He does the hiring and firing." With that, he shuffled away toward the house.

"Where you from, Bell?" Prod asked.

"South of here a piece," Eddie answered evasively.

"Maybe you don't want to say exactly where you're from?"

"Maybe you guessed it."

Prod took some time to digest that, but Eddie couldn't make out from the man's expression what was going on inside his head.

"I'll give you a try," Prod said at last. "I might as well tell you a man has to carry his weight if he stays on here."

"I'm a pretty good weight-carrier," Eddie said.

"There goes the chow bell."

There were four men in the Box H crew, not counting Prod and the cook. They acknowledged the introductions with assorted grunts and went back to the business of stuffing their mouths with food. They were a hard-looking lot who carried their guns low and didn't waste energy by shaving and trying to look pretty.

Eddie sat between a burly redhead called Red Blair and a thin, sharp-faced gent by the name of Slim Summers. They didn't warm up to Eddie. In fact, neither said a half dozen words all through the meal.

That afternoon, nobody seemed to have much to do. But when night came, things began to liven up.

"Eddie," Prod said, "we got a little business to attend to tonight. You might as well be in on it. Start a new man out right by seeing what he's made of, I always say."

AT THAT moment, By Holly hobbled up from the ranch house. He looked worried. He sucked on his pipe and scowled at the saddled horses.

"Where you boys aiming to go tonight?" he asked.

"Same as usual," Prod answered. "We're going to watch them settlers in the valley. If they're stealing our beef like I think they are, it's time we was catching 'em at it."

"If you think they're stealing our beef," Holly said, "the thing to do is talk it over with Abe Farling. You can trust Abe."

"You can't trust Abe or any of those clodbusters!" Prod said angrily. "If we ain't careful, they'll be running us out of business. Come on, men, let's hit leather."

Four men rode away from the Box H that night. Prod Pierce led the way, trailed by Red Blair, Slim Summers, and Eddie. They rode southward across the rolling range and at last cut into a narrow gorge that led into the valley. At this point, Prod reined up beside Eddie.

"Uncle By's losing his grip," he said. "If it wasn't for me, he'd let them damned farmers plow up the whole country!"

A thin moon showed in the sky, adding to the light of the stars. The four men rode deeper and deeper into the sleeping valley with its scattered farms. They came to a fence, and Red Blair slid to the ground and silently snipped the wires. They cut through a field of growing corn. When they topped a gentle slope, Eddie saw a scattering of low buildings standing out black against the sky and suddenly knew where they were. They had come to Abe Farling's home.

Prod motioned them to a halt. "All right, men," he said quietly. "Red and Slim, you circle to the west and make some noise to get their attention. Eddie and I will handle things at this end."

"Just a minute," Eddie said. "I don't quite get it."

"We're going to fire Farling's barn," Prod said. "That's part of my plan to get these people to move on."

Eddie didn't stop to figure the odds. Not him. He spurred his horse around and faced the three men with gun in hand.

"That's what you think!" he said. "I'm taking you on in to Abe, and we'll turn you over to the sheriff!"

He waited tensely to see if anyone was going to contest his statement. Nobody made a move.

Then Prod said, "What're you going to use for proof. There are three of us against—"

A rifle shot cracked out. It came from the big cottonwood in Abe's yard, and the bullet whistled so close to Eddie's head that he could smell it.

Involuntarily he ducked, and his roan skittered. The next thing he knew, he'd lost control of the situation.

Prod's gun came up flaming. Eddie leaped from his skittering horse, hit the ground, and rolled behind a clump of big weeds. There, he discovered that he'd lost his gun. That made him downright mad.

He heard the Box-H men clattering away. Swearing furiously, he stumbled to his feet and began to search for the gun. But before he got his bearings Abe Farling stepped up and put the end of a sixgun barrel against his back.

"Watch your hands!" Abe said, and Eddie stood very still, not liking the feel of that gun against his spine.

Then Tommy came hurrying around the corner of the barn, the old Winchester gripped in his hands. He stumbled over Eddie's gun and picked it up.

"At last we've caught one of 'em!" the kid said.

EDDIE began to do some fast talking. He explained that he had joined up with the Box H outfit merely to discover what was going on. "I figured that was the easiest and best way to prove who's causing you folks all your trouble," he said.

"Now you can prove it?" Abe asked grimly.

"Sure," Eddie said without thinking. "Those sidewinders who got away were Red Blair, Slim Summers, and Prod Pierce. They were going to burn your barn, but I—"

He stopped talking, for suddenly he realized he couldn't prove a thing. It was his word against that of the Box H crew, and they'd all swear they'd had nothing to do with this night raid. Prod wasn't exactly a fool. He'd let Eddie ride with them tonight because he knew Eddie couldn't do anything or prove anything.

"You're a rancher," Abe said. "You ranchers work together!"

"Pa," Tommy reminded, but he didn't sound very convincing, "don't forget that he kept Prod from shooting me."

"For all we know," Abe said, his voice like a stroke of doom, "the whole thing might've been an act to make us trust him."

"I'm trying to help you," Eddie said doggedly. "I—"

"I ought to take you in to the sheriff," Abe cut in. "But one time your pa did me a favor, so—"

Betty had come up to them and was standing there silently, doubtful of Eddie. Looking at her, he felt kind of sick, because of the way mistrust had blown his dream into little pieces.

"Give him his gun, Tommy," Abe said.

Tommy handed over the sixgun, and Eddie shoved it back into the holster. He felt like a whipped dog.

"Fork your horse, boy, and ride!" Abe said. "And don't ever come back here!"

Eddie found his hat and clamped it down over his rusty hair. Suddenly anger ran through him, but he was in no position to argue. He caught his horse, swung into the saddle, and rode away.

Later, bedded down under the stars for the night, he tried to figure things out. He needed a piano, he decided, for his thoughts simply wouldn't jell without music to jog it along.

The next afternoon, he rode into Lobo Junction. The one street, dusty and deserted, was baking in the sun. He left his horse in a spot that would soon be shaded by the false front of the Cattlemen's Saloon and eased through the batwing. Except for the bartender, the place was empty.

The bartender didn't seem overjoyed to see Eddie. No doubt he considered him a nosy gent who didn't have sense enough to stick to his own affairs. But Eddie didn't mind the cold welcome. In fact, he scarcely noticed it. He went straight over to the battered piano and began to play a sad, lonesome tune.

Before he really got his thinking in gear, old Doc Jones waddled in, and Eddie knew that here was a man he wanted to talk things over with. He banged out one last mournful chord and shoved to his feet.

"Don't stop now," Doc said. "Just sit still, and I'll bring you a drink."

But Eddie didn't want a drink. He got hold of Doc's fat arm and propelled him out into the street.

"Doc," Eddie said, "I got a story to tell you." Standing there in the heat and the little swirls of dust, he told what had happened the night before.

"So you and the Farlings were neighbors back in Missouri," Doc said, squinting thoughtfully at him. "So you rode over to see 'em, walked into a mess of trouble, got sucked in a little deeper last

Sagebrush Sam Says:

Men have died in a heap of different kinds of accidents and from a heap of different ailments, but you'll find that mighty few of 'em ever drowned in their own sweat.

night, and now don't know which way to jump."

"That's about it," Eddie admitted. "You believe I'm not one of the Box H sidewinders, don't you?"

"Why, yes," Doc answered, grinning. "I believe your story, because Betty Farling's a mighty pretty girl. If I was a young feller like you, I'd bust my buttons to do something for her and her family, too."

Eddie felt himself turning red, but his spirits rose.

"I don't know what to say," Doc went on. "Now, if you had a stomach ache or —But how to settle this trouble between the Box H and the settlers, that's a hoss of a different color."

DOC edged toward the shade, and Eddie felt his spirits sink again.

"You've ruined your chance of ever setting foot on the Box H to find out what they're up to," the medico said. "And like as not, Prod will put a bullet through you if you ever give him half a chance. As for Abe, he'd likely do the same if he ever caught you shining around Betty. Looks like you're between two fires, son."

Eddie guessed that was about the truth. "But," he added doggedly, "I figure I'll stick around a while, anyway, to see what happens."

"Good boy!" Doc said. "And if I can help you— Let's go back in and have that drink."

But Eddie had no time to bother with a drink. He took his horse to the livery barn and stabled him for the night. Then he crossed over to the hotel and rented a room. He cleaned up and had his supper and watched the town come to life as the night air began to fan out the daytime heat.

Presently he wandered back to the Cattleman's Saloon, which seemed to be the meeting point for the male citizens. Doc Jones wasn't there, but some of the others remembered Eddie as the piano-playing gent who had stopped a fight.

"How about playing us a tune?' one citizen asked.

That was exactly what Eddie had had in mind. He sat down at the piano and in a few minutes had lost his worries in the soft, dreamy music. But by and by, he came back to earth, and the notes went sour under his long fingers.

"What you need, son, is a stiff drink," somebody said.

Eddie shook his head. He had enough to worry him without waking up in the morning with a hang-over. So he eased through the batwings and headed toward the hotel.

He should have paid some mind to what was going on about him, but as usual he was in a hurry. He came to an alley, and the next thing he knew, he didn't know anything.

When he finally began to recover from being hit over the head, the sun was shining through a dirty window in a dirty, small log shack. The first thing he saw was an unfriendly gent by the name of Red Blair keeping watch over him. Red wore his guns low and handy.

Naturally, Eddie wanted to know where he was and how he'd got there. Red wasn't in a very good humor, but he did answer the questions.

"Prod and me brought you here," he said. "Stole your hoss and saddle out of the livery barn and let you ride him like you was a sack of oats. This place is an old line camp on the Box H."

"What's the deal?" Eddie asked.

"A good one," Red said, grinning sourly. "Two birds killed with one stone."

Eddie couldn't figure that one out, so he asked for an explanation. But Red had said his piece and wouldn't utter another word. Then Eddie discovered that his feet were tied to the bunk. He didn't like that any way he looked at it, but his captor showed neither interest nor sympathy.

Just as the last rays of the sun were disappearing and the dirty window began to darken, Eddie heard horses come clattering up to the shack. A moment later, Prod Pierce shambled inside.

"Everything's all set," he told Red. He looked at Eddie and grinned like a tomcat with a mouse to tease. "Untie the danged doublecrosser, Red," he said, "and let's

get going."

He stood there in the doorway, ready for business, while Red unfastened Eddie's feet from the bunk. The three of them went outside, and much to Eddie's surprise, Prod gave him his gun.

BUT the surprise died when Prod said, "In case you're interested, it's been shot empty."

Slim Summers and another rider were waiting for them with the horses. They mounted, and Eddie swung into his own familiar saddle. Prod and Red closed in on him, and they rode in silence through the gathering darkness.

This time Eddie knew where they were going, and his heart felt like a hunk of cold lead. He didn't know exactly what the play would be when they reached their destination, but he had a hunch it wouldn't be good for him. When the settlers found him, he guessed he would be a very dead cowboy with his empty gun gripped in his hand.

"Well, we got one of them night riders," the settlers would say with grim satisfaction, and that would be that!

Tonight, the Box H riders stopped at the foot of a slope where they could not be seen from the top of the cottonwood in Abe Farling's yard. Whistling softly between his teeth, Prod fashioned a torch from an old gunnysack and a green elm limb. Over the tightly rolled burlap he poured the contents of a whisky bottle, and the smell of kerosene filled the air. He handed the torch to Eddie.

"It's all yours, Bell," the big man said. "Get down and crawl over that ridge. I'll be right behind you."

Prod had his gun in his fist and he wasn't fooling.

As if by prearrangement, the rest of the crew rode to the east along a gully.

"They'll draw the gunfire from the old man and the boy," Prod told Eddie. "So the only gun you got to worry about is mine!"

Eddie didn't hanker to have a bullet tear a tunnel through him. He dropped to his knees and crawled over the ridge. He could hear Prod trailing close behind. The moon was hazy, and the Farlings' barn stood out like a black lump against the skyline. Eddie and Prod halted in the lee of a rock formation to wait for the Box H men to circle the homestead.

"One of us is going to set fire to that barn," Prod said flatly, "and it ain't going to be me!"

A shot cracked out from the top of the big tree.

"Now's the time!" Prod hissed.

He struck a match and held the flame to the oil-soaked burlap.

"Straight ahead, Bell, and toss that fire through the side door. If something goes wrong, you'll get hurt pretty bad!"

More shots rang out from the east side of the homestead, and the Winchester answered from the tree. Eddie stumbled to his feet and ran forward. Bits of charred burlap whipped into his face, and the fumes were sickening. He was halfway across the barn lot when Abe Farling, tall and gaunt, stepped from the black doorway into the dim moonlight. He raised his gun.

"Drop that fire, or I'll shoot!" he yelled.

A shot cracked out from Prod's gun. Abe staggered back and slumped in a twisted heap near the barn door.

Eddie ran on toward the prone man, his eyes searching for a way out of this mess. If it weren't for the light of the flaming torch, he figured maybe he could get hold of Abe's gun and turn it against the Box H gang. But as long as the torch turned the barn lot into a lighted stage—Then he saw the pig trough half filled with water.

He swerved toward it, flung the torch, and dived for the ground. He hit and rolled away from a singing slug just as the torch hit the water and went out with a great hiss. Prod's gun blasted again and again, but the floundering Eddie was a poor target in the sudden darkness. He rolled against Abe's body and found the gun.

PROD had forgotten about Abe's gun. He came running in for the kill, and

Eddie squeezed the trigger. Prod yelled and stumbled and went down. At that moment, the Box H men came pounding up over the ridge, wondering what all the shooting was about.

They were easy targets against the sky, and Eddie went to work. He knocked two of them from their saddles before they knew what was going on. The third man wheeled about and raced away. Eddie had fired his last shot, but the fight was over.

As he stumbled to his feet, Tommy Farling came running around the end of the barn, the Winchester gripped in his hands.

"Who're you?" he demanded, leveling the gun.

Eddie told him, and it was almost all right with Tommy. Then the kid saw his dad sprawled out on the ground and couldn't think of but one thing to do.

"You sneaking, barn-burning killer!" he snarled and leveled the rifle again.

Just then a fat little man came plunging around the barn. It was old Doc Jones.

"Take it easy, Tommy," Doc wheezed. "My guess is that Eddie was forced into this. In fact, I heard in a round about way that Red Blair stole Eddie's horse out of the livery barn last night, so—"

As Doc talked, the urge to kill drained out of Tommy. Slowly he lowered the rifle.

"You always played square with us, Doc," he said. "I guess I can believe you now."

"It was Prod Pierce who shot your pa," Doc went on. "And it was Eddie who shot Prod with your pa's gun. Prod's laying back there now near the pig trough."

While he had been talking, Betty had come up, carrying a lighted lantern. With a little cry, she dropped down beside her father. Then she lifted her head and said in a voice ringing with hope, "He's not dead! He's opening his eyes!"

Abe sat up dizzily, and Betty began to wipe away the blood. Doc Jones looked at the man and grinned broadly.

"You're a lucky cuss, Abe," he said. "That bullet just peeled off some of your scalp and—somebody's coming!"

A rider galloped up out of the darkness on a white horse. It was By Holly.

"I decided to trail Prod and the boys tonight," he said in a tired voice, "but didn't get here in time, I guess." He stopped talking for a moment to stare about. "I never liked the idea of the valley being broken up for farming," he went on dully, "but I didn't tell Prod to run you folks out. It was his own idea."

"Why did Prod want to run us out?" Abe growled.

"Maybe you've forgot he's my nephew," Holly said. "My only living relative. The Box H was to be his when I got through with it, and he wanted this valley."

"You can believe By Holly," Doc Jones said quietly. "He never lied to any man!"

"Thanks, Doc," Holly said gratefully. Then, turning to Abe again. "Farling, I've got plenty of range outside this valley. The Box H won't bother you again." Again his eyes roved over the lantern-lit scene. "That's Prod over there, ain't it?"

"Yeah," Tommy answered for his father.

"I'll send a wagon over," Holly said. He wheeled his horse and rode away.

Tommy helped Abe to his feet and headed toward the house.

"Got to be on my way," Doc Jones said cheerfully. "John Fergus' wife's time has come. That's how I happened to be going by when the shooting began. But maybe I better take a look at them Box H boys just in case—"

He took the lantern from Betty and headed toward the ridge. That left Betty and Eddie standing there alone.

Funny thing, Eddie thought, how when life seemed most dismal, a man would suddenly find himself in the clear. Why, ten minutes ago—

But Eddie Bell wasn't the kind of young man to waste valuable time philosophizing. He was a hurry-upper. So right then and there, he put his arms around the girl and kissed her. Which must have been what she wanted him to do, for she certainly didn't offer any objections.

"Gosh, Betty!" he whispered and kissed her again. ● ● ●

COWBOY BRAIN-TEASERS

(Answers on page 111)

ARE YOU CATTLE WISE?

Listed below (in jumbled fashion) are ten names pertaining to cattle, together with a thumbnail description of each. See if you can match up at least 7 correctly for a passing score; 8-9 is good; 10 excellent.

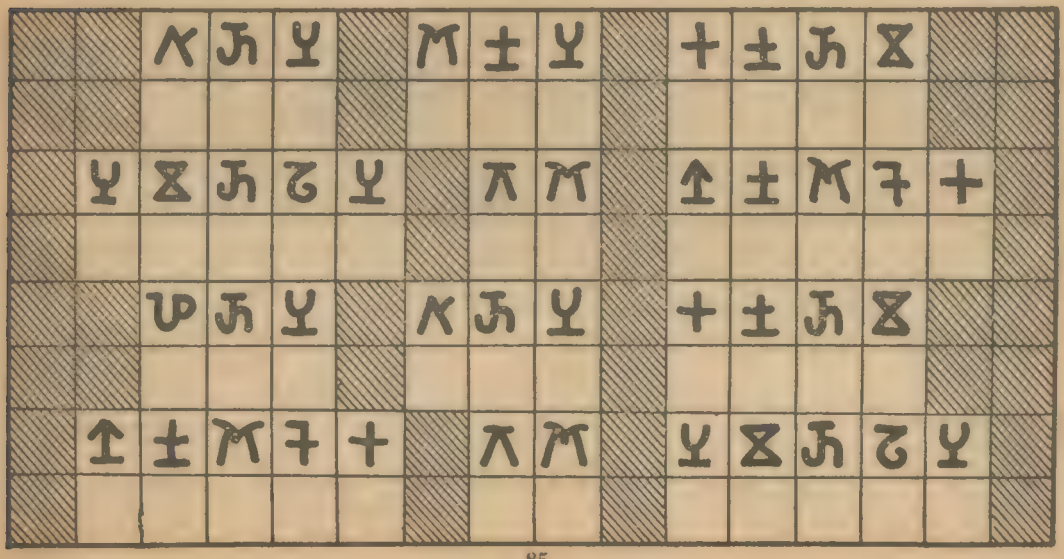
1. MAVERICK	*(a) an ox, especially a beef-ox, over four years old.*
2. DOGIE	*(b) a bull, ox, full-grown steer or cow, fattened for slaughter.*
3. CALF	*(c) a hornless cow.*
4. BULL	*(d) an unbranded calf.*
5. COW	*(e) a motherless, underfed calf.*
6. STEER	*(f) the female of domestic cattle.*
7. MULEY	*(g) the young of a cow.*
8. STRAYS	*(h) the male of domestic cattle.*
9. BEEF	*(i) cattle that have wandered away from the herd.*
10. BULLOCK	*(j) an ox of any age.*

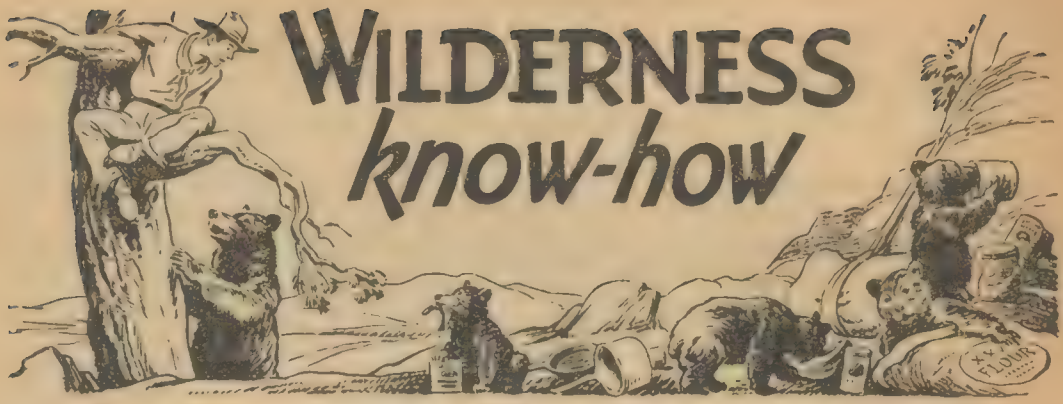
BRAND-O-GRAM

This puzzle isn't so difficult to solve as might appear at first glance. It's a quotation by Chief Justice Holmes on trust. The words are spelled out in famous old ranch brands with each letter being represented by a brand. Read the following clues and you'll already be well on your way to solving it.

The letter A does not appear at all in the quotation, E—appears two times, I—2 times, O—5 times and U appears 6 times.

Here are further clues to help you: There are a dozen words in the quotation with ten of them appearing twice. The quotation begins with the letter P and ends with the letter T.





HOW TO WRITE—WITHOUT INK OR PAPER

MANY mountain men, or trappers, who roamed the early West in quest of beaver furs had more wilderness savvy than some Indians, and one of the most resourceful of the lot was one Jedediah Smith. He had great daring and determination, too. Along about 1834, Jed sloped southwesterly out of the trappers' headquarters at Spanish Forks, near Salt Lake City, across the desert to coastal California, northward into Oregon Territory, then back across Nevada's wastelands to his starting point.

At heart, Jed Smith was an explorer. Unlike most of his kind, who were uncouth and illiterate, he had a fair education, so he kept a daily diary describing his remarkable journey.

Destroyed by Fire

Unfortunately, that priceless document was destroyed in a fire. The only record left of his experiences was contained in letters he wrote to friends and relatives back East after his return.

Now how did Jed Smith write that diary? Traveling with only saddle packs, fording rivers, dodging hostile Indians, enduring storms and all the other rigors of life in the open, he certainly was unable to lug along a bottle of ink and a pen. There were no five-and-dimes along the way where he could buy a lead pencil. Besides, lead pencils had not yet come into use.

How, then, did he make a written record? In all the many volumes of pioneer history there isn't a single word about this matter of writing. If you were alone in the wilderness for many months, how would you keep track of all the experiences you wanted to remember?

In other words, how would you manage to write anything legible and lasting without either pen or pencil?

Such lore and skill as Jed might have

learned from the Indians couldn't have been of much use. Primitive man, when he felt like getting something off his chest, made lasting records on the rocks. Even yet, in numerous parts of the West, there are cliffs hacked with pictographs, or picture writing. The Spanish wrote and drew maps on sheepskin parchment.

Slow Going

But stone tablets were too unhandy to haul on horseback over thousands of trackless miles, and Jed didn't have time to stop and skin out a sheep every time he wanted to jot down something.

Somehow he managed the job of writing through his hardy resourcefulness, his wilderness know-how.

Today, we can only guess at the means he employed.

Of course, it was not impossible to obtain writing fluid. Native tribes, such as the Navajos, long knew how to extract dyes of various colors from certain plants. Ochre and other mineral coloration were used for war paint. It was possible, even, to squeeze out enough bug juice to wet a goose quill.

But having done that, what did Jed do for stationery? Ancients of the Old World made papyrus out of reeds. (When they wanted to write, they had to *reed* first.) But Jed couldn't mess around with any such laborious process of paper-making.

He Made Maps, Too

Yet keep a diary he did, containing several thousand words in all probability, and drew maps which he later re-drew from memory, showing the location of mountain ranges, rivers, and settlements.

They were pretty good maps, too, on the whole, although he showed the Klamath and Rogue Rivers, near the California-Oregon boundary, as one river. The map of his route across northern Nevada was used later on to lay out the Pony Express route and was found to be dependable.

It is easy enough to pounce on the guess that Jed used a lead bullet for a pencil. But have you ever tried to write with a bullet? It teaches you one thing—to be a word-saver. A bullet leaves a legible mark, if you bear down hard enough, but it is far from practicable for writing any more extensive memo than that of the passing days. Anyway, whittling notches on a long stick is an easier way to do that, as Robinson Crusoe learned.

The solution to this writing riddle is really quite simple. Lampblack or plain campfire soot, mixed with tallow and a little beeswax, can be molded into very satisfactory crayons that leave a waterproof, fadeproof mark. The inside of any dry raw skin or pelt makes a convenient writing surface.

And He Made Boats

Jed packed such hides and pelts, for he had other uses for them. When he wanted to cross a river too deep to ford, too dangerous to swim, he simply made a boat-frame of pliable boughs, lashed them together with strips of whang or rawhide, then soaked and stretched a whole hide over it.

It was in such a contraption that he crossed the turbulent Colorado River, near the present site of Boulder Dam, with pursuing Mojave Indians sending arrows after him. He proceeded afoot, after that escape, until he reached California and resupplied himself with horses.

So that boat of his could have been his diary, his bed and, when needed, a snug storm shelter. The knack of getting along when you have little to do with is to make a single article serve a variety of uses.

When he reached the Spanish-California settlements, Jed probably recopied his crudely-kept records onto sheets of paper. Yes, paper was obtainable at the missions and at military garrisons or pueblo offices. After all, books were published in Mexico City a long time before the Pilgrim Fathers landed on our American shores.

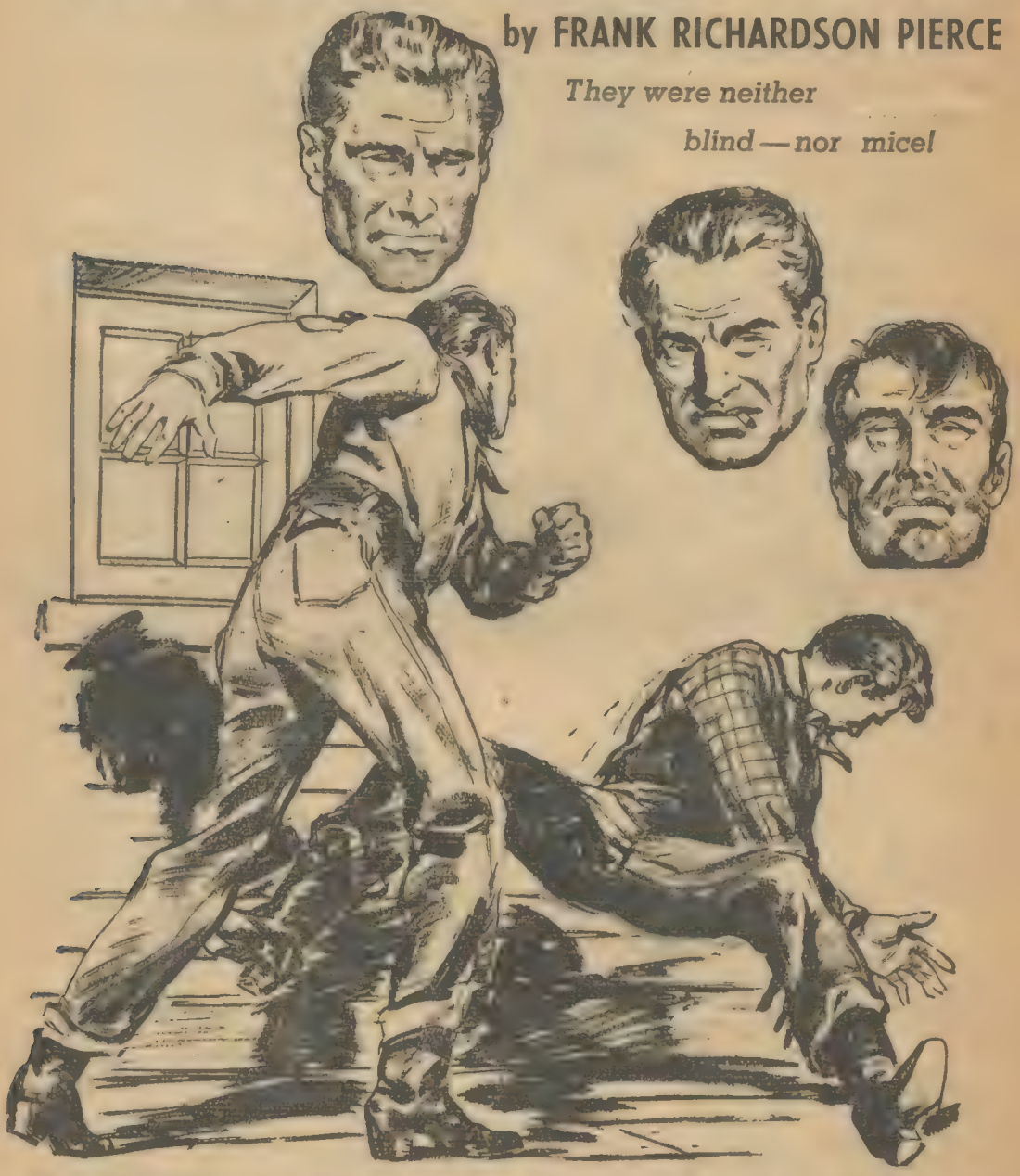
However he contrived to keep a diary, it was so simple and commonplace—to a contriving cuss like Jedediah Smith, anyhow—that he never bothered to mention in his writings *how* he wrote; and evidently historians have never had enough curiosity to try to find out about it.

—*Syl MacDowell*

THREE BLIND MICE

by FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

They were neither blind—nor mice!



AL BRADLEY was asleep when the bullet droned across the clearing and struck the length of stovepipe protruding above his cabin roof. It made a loud noise.

"Damn it, let me sleep," Al muttered. It was the groan of a man badgered beyond endurance. Although it was nearly noon, he muttered, turned over, and was

almost asleep when the second bullet hit the stovepipe.

He rolled from his cot and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Suddenly he caught the smell of burning wood—the peculiar, acrid odor of burning green fir, cedar, alders, brush, and pitchy snags.

He heard the scream of his saddle horse, Red, and the bellowing of his beef cattle. The crackle of flames came distinctly. He pulled on pants and shirt, stuffed his feet into his boots, and raced out. He grabbed his rope as he ran past the barn and dropped a noose over Red's head when the stallion galloped within range.

"Easy, boy, easy!" Tired though he was, Al spoke soothingly to the crazed animal. He had dug his heels into the dirt, but the horse was dragging him in a series of jerks.

Al took a quick turn around a stump, then ran to a near-by stretch of brush. To backfire meant the destruction of several thousand small fir trees in his nursery stock and ten acres of recently cut hay. But the hay was probably gone. Sparks had started a score of tiny blazes.

He plunged into the brush, struck matches and dropped them in clumps of dead ferns. The beef cattle were stampeding. Without a horse, he hadn't a chance of stopping them. They thundered across a pasture, hit the barbed wire fence, and passed through as if it weren't there. He heard brush and small trees crash as the fire-crazed animals pounded on.

"Just about the last straw," Al muttered. "Of course, with the woods dry, a fire can start accidentally. Somebody lights a cigarette and drops a match. They claim the sun shining through a broken bottle has a burning-glass effect. If there's dry stuff in line, the sun's rays start it burning. But—"

He broke off. In his opinion the Dixon boys were behind the series of losses that threatened to break him and drive him out of the country. Ann Summers called them the Three Blind Mice. "Blind," she had explained to Al, "because they didn't see the opportunity under their noses you saw the first time you rode through the country. "Blind, too," she had added, "because they can't see you can be pushed so far but no farther."

Perhaps the Dixon boys were neither blind nor mice. The toughest man could be broken if his enemies went about it methodically. It was a matter of patience, of constantly whittling away until he cracked. The secret was to never let the victim have the satisfaction of personal contact in the fight. The impact of a prospective victim's fist against solid enemy flesh is heartening.

Al had been denied that satisfaction. Two years ago he had picked up a booklet on tree farming. The old days of cutting the best timber and moving on to the next tract were over. The loggers had reached the Pacific Ocean. Ironically, the trees they had left because their grain was crooked or because they were too large to cut and yard cheaply had scattered seeds through the cut-over land. Trees were growing. In some areas, logged forty or fifty years previously, the second-growth trees were saw log size.

The big timber people were tree farming on a large scale, but the little operator was doing nicely, also. He was combining tree growing with either fruit or cattle raising. Al had spent several months drifting through the West—Montana, Idaho, Oregon and Washington—to check on the situation.

IN OREGON he found a three-hundred-acre tract that could be bought for the back taxes. The original owner, a small logging company, had let the property go to the county for unpaid taxes during the lean Thirties. An ancient pasture had survived during the years, and this fitted into Al's plan to raise beef and trees at the same time.

He had put nine thousand dollars of his own money into the proposition. He had fenced the pasture, cleared additional land and planted fir trees, which were to be replanted in areas where natural seeding had failed. It had meant working from fifteen to eighteen hours a day.

The trick was to clear away brush and

alders competing with the commercial trees for food in the soil and to let sunlight in. The trees would grow faster and straighter. Shortly before Christmas you thinned the stand by selective cutting. The cut trees were sold in the Christmas tree trade. The income meant he could buy a few additional calves and raise them for the beef market.

After he had been at the job a few weeks, had cleaned and repaired the old cabin and barns and had a little something for guests to drink, he had gone over to the adjoining Dixon place and introduced himself.

It seemed to Al that the heads of Joe and Pete Dixon were fastened to Mike Dixon by invisible wires. The three brothers said little, and that little came from Mike's lips. Before Joe or Pete answered a question, they looked to Mike for the cue. They were big, solid men with dull blond hair and unblinking blue eyes. Their equipment, such as it was, had been left in the rain to rust. Buildings needed repairs. Their income was derived chiefly from the sale of "peeler" logs used by the plywood manufacturers.

These logs, which came from trees three and four feet in diameter, brought the highest possible price. They were placed in machines with cutting edges and as they revolved, sheets of wood rolled off. It was pretty much like tearing paper towels from a roll.

Al learned that for years the Dixon brothers had grazed their cattle on what was now his land without paying the county a dime. Elsewhere some revenue came from land the county held for taxes.

"Things will happen to you or your property, Al," a logger had predicted. "They'll be little things that will cost you time and not very much money. But the total could break you in time. And you'll know who is back of it, but you won't be able to prove a thing. There's three of them to pester you, and they can work around the clock. And when they ain't up to something, you don't know it, so you stay on guard just the same and lose sleep."

Now Al sat on a log and watched the heat from his backfire wither the seedlings and set them aflame. Ann Summers came out of the timber and said, "You saved your big timber, Al, and that's something. You can buy nursery stock for replanting—"

"What with?" he asked bitterly. "I heard that small-town banks loaned money on character as well as property. It was the character loans that really built these towns. They'd back an ambitious, healthy young fellow. He'd raise cattle, fruit or wheat. The country would develop and with it the bank. In time, the guy who had borrowed money on character would own bank stock and be one of the directors. Of course, there were failures, but you'd find them anywhere."

"Go on," she said.

"Okay," he continued. "My first payment is due next week. I asked Parker, at the bank, to postpone it a few months. I thought cattle prices would take another jump. He wouldn't go for it, so I fattened my beef. You know where they are now —crazed by fire and scattered through the big timber."

"I saw the smoke," she said, "and put a couple of bullets through your stovepipe to wake you up. Minutes count when a fire starts and timber's dry."

The West has always had its Al Bradleys and Ann Summerses—the dark, rugged man with vision and the strength and courage to make dreams come true; the lovely, almost frail blonde girl, who somehow always finds the strength to do her share. Usually they marry, and their sons go out and blaze trails of their own; and their daughters marry trail blazers who happen by.

SITTING on the log with Ann at his side, Al was seeing a dream go up in smoke. If the bank had extended the payment time, he had reasoned, the higher price of beef plus marketing small firs for the Christmas trade would have left him enough money to build a decent cottage. Then he would have asked Ann to marry him.

"Hell," he thought, "I'll do well to make the interest payment."

"Licked, aren't you?" Ann said suddenly.

"Damned near it," he said. He looked at the girl he loved and suddenly decided she was a stranger.

"I'll say this much," Ann said, "the Three Blind Mice didn't find it easy. But they managed it. And I had bet you wouldn't be like the others who got in their way. I thought you'd turn the tables. It's nice to have known you, Al." She almost ran to her horse. Above the crackling of flames he heard the pounding of her horse's hoofs on the trail.

There hadn't been much of a trail between Ann's parents' chicken ranch and Al's place when he first took possession. But as he rode back and forth between the two places, he lopped off branches with a hand axe and laid small logs in the swampy places and built two light bridges.

He brooded for several minutes, then growled, "The hell with everything. Let the damned bank struggle with the Three Blind Mice a while." He stuffed his clothes into bags, saddled Red, locked the cabin door, and rode up the trail.

A half hour later he rested his horse on a ridge that overlooked the country. Smoke trailed lazily from the Dixon cabin. Near by were the great fir trees that supplied them with peeler logs.

"Dogs in the manger," Al said savagely. "They could develop a whale of a tree-cattle deal on their property if they would make the effort."

He thought of the little things that had *happened*. The slide which had dammed Beaver Creek. The dam that had burst, letting the water carry away top soil and drown three calves. The county health officer declaring the stream unsafe for drinking water. The well's caving in, forcing him to haul his water a half mile from a spring. The closing of the near-by bridge because it was "unsafe." He had had to build road to a ford, then on to the county road to reach town.

Al had bid on a telephone pole contract. A small stand of firs was the right size. Then had come an order closing the woods to all logging operations because of fire hazard. It was either be sued for non-performance of contract or buy poles in the open market. He had bought poles, made delivery, and taken a loss.

"Long hours of work," he growled, "broken sleep, and constant pressure. Hell, in the old days your enemy fought it out with fists or guns."

He watched a squirrel gather nuts and cache them in a hole in a tree. "That's me," he said, "working my damned fool head off." He was about to move on when he saw the squirrel's fur rise in anger or fear. It dropped the nuts and fled. A weasel popped out of the brush, hot on the squirrel's trail. "Dirty bastard," Al growled and hurled a rock.

Ten minutes passed, then the squirrel beginning to tire but lashed on by fear, scurried across the clearing. This time the weasel kept to cover, but Al saw the brush stir and left fly with a rock. Fifteen minutes later the squirrel reappeared, looking back, breathing hard, as if it knew there was no escape.

"Pressure! Pressure!" Al snarled. "That's what's doing it. The weasel never lets up." He threw rocks at different points in the brush, hoping to divert the weasel's interest.

He saw the squirrel cross a little open spot a hundred yards below. It looked over its shoulder, saw the weasel and summoning all its courage, faced its enemy with bared teeth. Al yelled, but the killer knew the man could do nothing. Its teeth flashed and it was over.

The weasel and its kill vanished into the brush. "Happens all the time," Al thought, "but you don't think about it until you see it. Wonder what will get the squirrel's nut cache? Wonder if some animal banker, holding a mortgage, will take over? And I wonder what kind of a coyote you are, Al Bradley, that you don't turn and die in your tracks?"

CHILDHOOD memories started the Three Blind Mice song going through his reflections. He couldn't shake it off.

"I'm no farmer's wife," he thought, "and the Dixon brothers haven't tails. But they've sure been after me. And though I don't have a carving knife, some other weapon might do." He turned to his horse. "Red, we're going back."

His horse nickered as he neared the home clearing, and Al stopped and peered cautiously through the dense mass of Christmas-tree-size firs. Joe Dixon's horse was tied to the fence, and Joe was prowling the cabin.

Al waited, thinking, "I'd like to catch him with the loot." There wasn't much—dishes, old clothes and bedding he couldn't carry with him—but it came under the general heading of private property. "Those damned Dixons never do what you expect," he grumbled. He tied Red, then keeping to the brush, approached the cabin.

Joe Dixon, paper and pad in hand, was taking an inventory of the cabin's furnishings. For once a Dixon face was not dead pan. Joe's tongue loosened up enough for him to say, "Taking inventory."

"For my dough," Al said, "you're a damned thief. You broke a lock to get in here." Al remembered that the squirrel hadn't wasted breath talking with the weasel. He was dead tired and lacking reserve strength and he might take a beating, but he didn't give a damn. At long last he had caught a Dixon up to something.

He hurled a piece of stove wood at the startled man. Dixon ducked, raised his fists, and began swinging. Al drove his head into the man's stomach and on the momentum generated, backed him into the wall, where Al's head seemed to penetrate to Dixon's spine.

Joe grunted horribly, and went limp. Al nailed him with a right and left to the jaw, watched the man crumple, then dropped into the nearest chair because his legs had grown weak.

When he recovered his strength, he bound and gagged Joe Dixon and dragged him to the barn. He pulled off Joe's boots, carried them to a clay bank near the creek, and made an impression of the nail pattern on heels and soles. He returned the boots to the barn.

"I'm going to rest up," Al thought. "Mike and Pete will wonder what's become of Joe and will investigate. I don't know what I'll do when they get here, but it better be good."

He had rested exactly five minutes, when he heard a car, in second gear, coming over his private road. He looked out and whistled softly. Parker, of Olympic State Bank, had appeared. Mike and Pete Dixon followed on horses.

"It's always three to one," Al reflected. "I thought, with Joe trussed up, it would be two to one."

Mike Dixon bellowed for Joe several times, then tried the door. "He's around somewhere. There's his horse, Mr. Parker," he said. "Door's locked." He peered through a window. "Joe's been here. There's his pencil and pad. Can't see the bunk. Maybe he's sick and laying down."

Mike went to the door, threw his shoulder against it. It flew open with a clatter. Pete and Parker followed him into the cabin. Al hurried across the yard and blocked the doorway.

"What a fine mess you're in, Mr. Parker," he said. "The law calls it breaking and entering. Damned poor company for a banker to find himself in."

PARKER was no fool. Otherwise he wouldn't have occupied a responsible position. He made a desperate attempt to regain the initiative.

"Your position is very shaky, Bradley," he said stiffly. "When I heard of the fire, I naturally hurried out to protect the bank's interests. The fire destroying young trees, the cattle stampeding, seriously impairs the bank's security. We had reason to believe you had written off the entire business as a loss."

"Now it's my turn to talk," Al said. "As a banker, it is your sworn duty to protect the depositors' interests. Right?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. We'll go to town, and you can start the necessary steps," Al said. "As a citizen whose home was broken into with-

out due process of law, it is my duty to turn the guilty parties over to the sheriff for necessary action. Right?"

"Now just a minute," Parker argued, "the unusual circumstances justify—"

"You got a little careless," Al interrupted, "and find yourself in a jam. I think a jury should decide." He turned to Mike. "Wondering what became of Joe? He broke in, too. I caught him. He's out in the barn." He began humming Three Blind Mice. The Dixons flushed darkly.

With Parker as a witness, there was little chance the Dixons would make trouble, and Al let them release Joe. As usual, Joe and Pete looked to Mike for their cue. But this wasn't Mike's day to come up with cues. He kept mopping his face. Al grinned.

"You boys are worried," he said. "You know what you've done to drive me out of the country. But you don't know how much I've found out, and I'm not telling you."

Al unsaddled all the horses and turned them loose in his horse pasture, which had escaped the fire. Then he asked Parker for a ride to town. Parker drove to the sheriff's office and led the way to the booking clerk.

"Tench," Al said to the deputy, "I'm charging all four with breaking and entering."

"Not Mr. Parker, too," Tench said, shocked.

"Mr. Parker, too," Parker said.

"You have my permission to release him on a dollar bail money," Al said. "But hold the Dixon boys until there's a hearing and bail fixed." He thought a moment. "Actually it's up to the sheriff. I just wanted you to know how I felt. I'll testify against all four."

Parker and Al walked in silence toward the bank. "Kind of complicated isn't it, Mr. Parker?" Al said at last. "You're in a position to grant me time to pull out of my financial trouble at the ranch. I'm in a position to *forget* important items in my testimony and secure your acquittal."

"True," Parker admitted. "Go on."

"As a banker you can't consider your personal situation," Al said. "As a decent citizen, I wouldn't drive that sort of a bargain—if I could. How're we going to solve my financial problem?"

"Shall we put it up to Mr. Ballinger, the president?" Parker said.

"Okay," Al said with a shrug. "He's tougher than you."

Mr. Ballinger, a blue-eyed man with a grim jaw and iron-gray hair, looked annoyed when they appeared in his private office. He paused in the act of checking an important-looking document, listened briefly, then said, "Mr. Parker, this is entirely in your hands. Whatever you do, the board will confirm. You know that."

"I don't want it said that I let my personal attitude affect the decision," Parker said.

"No one in his right mind would make such a charge," Ballinger snapped. He studied Parker sharply, then said, "Very well. Give details, Mr. Bradley, but be brief."

MR. PARKER vanished, and after the first sentence, Mr. Ballinger began to shake his head. "Seedlings burned, cattle scattered, no assured source of income," he summed up. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bradley, but we will have to foreclose. Yours isn't the first instance in which a sincere, hard-working man has lost everything through circumstances beyond his control."

"What about that asset known in the West as character?" Al inquired.

"Some of the early-day Western banks were ruined because they made loans on character," Ballinger said.

"And many of them were made, including your own bank," Al argued. "What's behind all this—this sudden effort on the part of the Dixon brothers to get control of my property? They could have picked it up for the taxes any time, but they were blind—three blind mice. What opened their eyes?"

"I couldn't say," Ballinger answered. "I really couldn't."

"Couldn't?" Al spoke softly. "You couldn't because you'd violate a confid-

ence. That's okay."

Ballinger's eyes were like gimlets, they were that penetrating. "You mentioned character, Mr. Bradley," Ballinger said. "Another asset the early-day Westerner had was vision."

"There's plenty of each at the present time," Al said. "Trouble is, bankers can't recognize it. Sorry we accomplished nothing."

"Young man," Ballinger said, "an exchange of viewpoints is always educational. Good afternoon."

Al left, shaking his head. "Harder'n the hubs of hell," he thought. "Wonder what he meant about vision?" He was pondering this when the banker's secretary called, "Mr. Ballinger would like to see you."

Al's heart leaped. Perhaps he had changed his mind. He stepped into the office, and Ballinger give him the gimlet-eye treatment again. "You married, Mr. Bradley?"

"Hell no," Al answered. "Do you think I'd ask a girl to share a run-down cabin, a mortgage, and the trouble the Dixon brothers have been dishing out?"

"Just curious," Ballinger observed. "Some girls like to share the tough going. I wouldn't give two cents for a girl who doesn't want to share the pleasures and pains of starting in the world."

On his way out, Al thrust his head into Parker's office. "Mr. Ballinger turned thumbs down. He shares your opinion on character loans. See you in court."

Al went over to the district attorney's office. "For your information, Mr. Parker didn't encourage the Dixon brothers to break into my cabin. It was done before he had a chance to object. He absent-mindedly followed them inside," he said.

"Will you testify under oath to that effect?"

"Yes," Al answered. "But the Dixon brothers is something else again."

"We'll have to get together on the case," the district attorney said. "Have you sound evidence?"

"Plenty," Al replied, "and more to come."

He caught a ride to within a half mile of his cabin and walked the rest of the way. He checked on the horses, wondered what his cattle were doing, double checked on the recent fire, and went to bed. "What a hell of a day!" he growled. Five minutes later he was asleep.

EARLY the following morning he made his way to the point where the fire had probably started. He walked slowly back and forth, fanning the ashes away from the baked dirt. There were clay areas at this point, and he reasoned that a man who had started a fire in the dead, dry ferns would cross this moist ground in his retreat rather than buck the brush. Presently he found what he was looking for—tracks in the baked clay. With the greatest care he removed a section and carried it to the cabin.

Ann Summers rode up as he came out. She was dressed in a rough flannel shirt, old boots, battered hat, and levis, but her beauty could survive the worst clothes without half trying.

"I thought you'd gone sour on me," Al said.

She smiled. "Hitting you when you were almost down hurt," she answered, "but if it helped a little to get you on your feet, well—"

"It took that, a little pride, and a squirrel turning on a weasel to get me up on my feet," he said. "I felt like a groggy boxer who gets off the canvas with his mouth full of rosin. Did you hear that Ballinger turned thumbs down and that I had Parker over a barrel?"

"Yes—and that you didn't take advantage," she said. "They're going to foreclose. I came over to help you round up your beef." She smiled again. "Ready?"

"Yes," he answered. He led the way to a ridge commanding a view of the Dixon brothers' timber and his own.

"I'll watch," she said, "and you read this booklet on explosives. It might help you."

He sat down on a rock and read the booklet carefully. "It gives me ideas," he said. "Thanks."

"I hoped it would," she said. "There're

two places among the alders on the creek bank where there's movement. The cattle have gone down for water and bunched up."

"It'll be rugged," he said, "but if we can keep them in the creek bed, they'll be behind my wire before they know it." He made no effort to move but studied the lower country, his eyes slowly moving back and forth.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"The overall picture the Three Blind Mice missed," he said. "Owned by one man or a small company, the two tree farms could supply on short notice any special product the lumber industry required. There are the big trees that supply the peeler logs. There are thousands of Christmas trees. In between are varying sizes of trees that can be cut for railroad ties, fence posts, telephone poles, piling, and saw lumber. There's a small stand of hemlock for the pulp mills."

"You have vision," she said.

"Ballinger mentioned vision," he said, "but it came too late. There's an old saying a man couldn't see the forest because of the trees. I was on the right track but didn't raise my sights high enough.

"Notice the small meadows tucked away in the timber," he continued, "and little lakes. Cutting trails would serve a double purpose—you could get forest fire equipment over the trails in a hurry and you could drive cattle from meadow to meadow. If I had the money or if the damned bank would loan a few bucks on character—"

"I know," she said. "I know." She was looking at him with an odd wistfulness.

"I love you, Ann," he said, "and I was working long hours so that I could come to you with something concrete."

"I'd have been waiting, ready to go, for better or worse," she said, "if you had come to me bringing just—you."

"Suppose I come out of this with a few hundred bucks?" he said. "The beef will bring something, and unless the place goes for peanuts, there should be something over after the bank's paid off. Suppose we search the country, together, until we find a little grazing land, a little rolling country with timber beginning to grow again, why—"

"It would be a new start and a long way back," she said, "but a cow, a few chickens and pigs, and a vegetable garden would help along. Al, I'd love it."

HE TOOK her in his arms and kissed her. "A man who's willing to work and backed by a girl like you can't be stopped," he said, "but the combination isn't worth a loan at most banks these days. Ballinger talked of vision. Why the hell can't he see beyond columns of figures and collateral?"

"I've wondered, darling," she answered. "Let's get started."

He led the way down the timbered slope to the point where the slide had damned the creek. Months ago, the area above the creek, where earth and trees had once stood, had been smeared with muck. But rains had washed it off, and the rock was almost clean.

He crossed the stream and climbed up. "What do you think?" she shouted.

"The things I found in your little book prove what I've thought right along," he answered. He slid into the creek and splashed across. "I thought I was tired, but I'm feeling better every minute."

She smiled. Momentum and the opportunity to get his teeth into something were carrying him along. She knew he was dead tired and underweight. She thought, "We should be married tomorrow and I should start feeding him right. I know how and what he's been eating. The empty tin cans under the kitchen window tell the story."

They pushed through the brush, heads down to avoid scratches, and found a small bunch of cattle. The animals had lost weight and were wild. There were snorts. Eyes rolled in sockets and tails went up as they took off.

In spite of all the two could do, the animals pounded downstream in fright. "I can't slow them down, Al," Ann panted. "I tried to cut in ahead, but they would have rolled right over my horse."

"We'll ease up, or they'll go through the wire again," he said.

They picked up the second bunch, and the animals knocked over alders and tramped down brush as they moved downstream. The lead animals hit Al's barbed wire and turned. They hesitated when they caught the lingering smell of ashes and burned wood, then went on until they found the bottom land with its grass. The two dismounted and repaired the break in the fence.

"They'll be calmed down in a day or two," Al said. He sat down on a log and smoked a cigarette. When it was finished, he carefully ground the butt into the dirt.

"The forest rangers would approve," she said.

"Are you doing anything tomorrow?" he asked.

"Nothing," she answered.

"Meet me at the bank at ten o'clock," he said. "I'll start winding up *my* affairs so we can get started on *our* affairs."

"I'll be there," she said. "In the meantime, will you do something for me?"

"Anything," he answered.

"I want to cook you a meal. We'll eat it slowly and we won't talk business," she said. "We'll do the dishes together, and then I'll ride home. I want you to go to bed and sleep fifteen hours."

"Sounds reasonable," he said.

WHEN the district attorney opened his office the following morning, Al Bradley was waiting for him. "I've evidence here that Joe Dixon started that fire," Al said. "Here's a pattern of Joe's boot sole that I made in clay, which I baked. And here's a pattern I dug out of baked clay near the scene of the fire. You'll find that they match."

"Very interesting," the district attorney said. "It looks as if we might put those fellows away for a few years. I'll recommend that the judge increase their bail. So far they haven't raised bail on the breaking and entering charge. Now, you'll need a good lawyer."

"Have you anyone in mind?" Al inquired.

"Randall is old," the district attorney said, "but he's specialized in cases involving Western lands, irrigation, wheat, cattle, and timber."

Al thanked him and hurried over to Randall's office. The lawyer's hair was silver, and his face was weathered. Al concluded he had spent as much time in the open as he had in the court room and office.

"Here's the situation," Al said, "what can be done about it?" He gave the lawyer an outline of what had happened.

"A lot can be done about it," the lawyer said. "You seem to be in a hurry."

"A man who wants to marry the right girl and make a new start is naturally in a hurry," Al answered. "Now, I'm going over to the bank. Let me know when you need me. I'll be out to my place marking time. Those damned Dixons," he added suddenly. "The county is feeding them, and I'm feeding their horses."

Mr. Parker nodded as Al met Ann in the bank. "Nice morning, Mr. Bradley," he said.

"What the hell's nice about it, except meeting Ann?" Al wanted to retort. "I'm losing my place." He joined Ann, and together they went into Ballinger's office.

Ballinger was very busy as usual, but he was curious. "Miss Summers and I plan to marry soon and make a new start," Al told him. "You're foreclosing. What is the shortest time we can wind up this mess?"

"What are you going to start on?" Ballinger asked.

"Character," Al barked, "the confidence we have in each other's character. My trouble was brought on by the Dixon brothers, who saw a chance to get their paws on my place, combine it with their own, and then be in a position to supply any kind of timber on demand. And—use my beef to build up a small herd to supply near-by markets. All, of which they somehow figured to bring about without much effort on their part."

"Well, go on. What are you doing about it?"

"I've hired Mr. Randall to sue the Dixon

brothers for blasting off a mass of earth, damming my creek, and causing extensive damage when the dam broke," Al said.

"Can you prove it?"

"Thanks to Ann, yes," Al replied. "She gave me a booklet on explosives. Fractured rock at the site proves it was a blast, not a slide. I'm bringing a damage suit against them for starting the fire which destroyed my nursery stock—because I had to backfire—and stampeded my cattle. Whatever I collect Ann and I will use for a new start."

"I see," Ballinger said. "These things take time. Naturally when we foreclose, anything we get above what is due the bank goes to you. My advice is that you put your place in the best possible shape in the meantime, so it will bring the highest price."

"That means postponing the wedding," Al protested.

"Why?" Ballinger asked. "It's been my observation that newly married people are happy because they're working *together* and not because of where they *are*. Now, have you any suggestions about this, Mr. Bradley?"

"Get someone who can buy out the Dixon brothers and combine it with my place as a single unit," he answered. "They can afford to pay more for each."

"I'll see what can be done," Ballinger promised. "In the meantime, fix up your property."

They left the bank and walked slowly down the street. "What do you think, Ann?" he asked.

"I think that what each of you said made sense," she answered.

"How soon can we marry?" he asked. "A girl has to have time—making the dress, the wedding plans and everything else."

She thought, "He doesn't know that a girl who has waited, dreamed and planned needs little time." She smiled wisely. "Give me a week, and we'll have the sort of wedding a girl wants—a church, friends, flowers, and a reception."

"And a honeymoon in Seattle," he added. . . .

FOR a man back from his honeymoon, Al was glum. "There's Ann, turning this cabin into a home, knocking herself out working, only to have someone else take over," he thought.

His beef were putting on weight, and Al had ploughed the burned-over area that had once contained seedling firs. The new man could plant grass there. He could buy seedlings as needed from the government or from some private nursery.

Al was cleaning out an old trail so that the new man would see that cattle could be driven from pasture to pasture on the two places. During a rainy week he burned a lot of brush. This had been cleared and piled, which let in light and speeded the growth of the young firs. That should impress whoever came to bid. If several people bid, the selling price should be high.

Each noon he hurried to the cabin for a hot lunch. Sometimes in the afternoon he showed up and told Ann he felt the need of a cup of coffee. He wasn't fooling himself or Ann. He wanted to see her, that was all.

He realized as he dressed one morning that he was putting on weight again.

Whenever a car came over his rough road now, dread gripped him, for a car could mean the showdown had come and that bidders were looking over his property. In a way, he wanted to get it over with. On the other hand, he was happy and didn't want a break to come.

Three months after the wedding, a brief note came from Ballinger. It read:

> Dear Mr. Bradley:
> Will Mrs. Bradley and you please call Friday morning, ten o'clock, and close this matter which has been pending for some time.

"Here it is," Al said.

"Oh Lord!" Ann groaned. "I've dreaded it. But this has been fun. Several men have been over the place, but they didn't mention buying it." She kissed him. "We've learned one thing—we're a darned good team. Oh, we'll have our spats from time to time, but we pull together. We'll make a new start somewhere, and my

roots will take just as they have here—like a transplanted fir seedling."

When they arrived at the bank, Mr. Randall and another lawyer named Jennings were there. Mr. Ballinger, as usual, was frowning over papers. Jennings, it developed, was the Dixon brothers' lawyer.

"Everything seems to be in order," Ballinger said, looking up from the papers. For a moment he seemed disappointed, but he brightened, and took charge. "On Mr. Jenning's advice, the Dixon brothers have entered a guilty plea to various charges and thrown themselves on the mercy of the court."

"Good!" Al said. "It will save the taxpayers the costs of a trial."

At the mention of saving money, Ballinger gave Al a benign smile, then resumed. "Mr. Randall and Mr. Jennings have agreed on a settlement of the damages the Dixon brothers caused you, Mr. Bradley, subject to your approval."

"Mr. Randall's judgment is good enough for me," Al said.

"The damages will force the Dixons to sell," Ballinger continued. "We have worked out a proposition whereby the two places can be offered as a single unit for tree farming and cattle raising. We have settled on a price. We are offering you, Mr. Bradley, the first chance. If you are not interested, others are waiting."

"Just what will we use for money?" Al asked.

"Because of Mr. Parker's slight error in entering your cabin with the Dixon brothers you were in a position to suggest a deal, Mr. Bradley. This you did not do. The bank is greatly impressed with your integrity. You are a married man. Mrs. Bradley has worked with you. A man can't succeed without the right kind of a wife. You are fortunate." He bowed to Ann.

"The settlement you receive from the Dixon brothers will satisfy the bank as a down payment on a refinancing plan," Ballinger continued. "There will be a nice balance remaining for seedlings, calves, and your immediate needs. The payments for the next five years will be moderate to give your trees a chance to grow and your herd to increase. We are basing this loan on assets, including—*character.*"

"He almost choked on that last word," Al thought, "but he isn't a bad guy."

They signed the necessary papers and shook hands all around. Mr. Ballinger beamed. "You're a fine, feet-on-the-ground young couple who'll live within your means," he said.

"Thanks," Al answered, "but don't be shocked if you see Ann wearing an ermine neckpiece this winter."

"What?" Ballinger shouted. "Ermine?" He was shocked.

"Yes, ermine," Al said genially. "That's what the furriers call weasels. Lots of 'em on our place. I'll start trapping as soon as their fur is prime. I don't like 'em—they kill squirrels." ● ● ●

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THE HAPPY HANGMAN'S HELPER

A True Story

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

HANGING as a means of dispensing justice seems to have been used with an eagerness bordering on pleasure in the days when the West was being civilized with a rope and a Colt. The pioneer, like his more cultured descendant, was not averse to employing the most macabre methods of extracting human life if he could soothe his conscience by the rather specious excuse that he was motivated by the urge to see evil reap its just reward.

As an example of this, students of Western justice are instantly reminded of Judge Parker, the Hanging Judge of Fort Smith. So great was the judge's zeal to see right prevail that any man who appeared before him for sentence knew in advance that he would soon be hanging by his neck from the gallows, which would sometimes be tripped by the righteous judge's own hand. For it just happened that the judge was also on occasion the hangman and that, by a matter of pure coincidence, *Hangman* Parker would collect a nice fee for executing the men sentenced to die by *Judge* Parker.

Parker was not alone in finding a sinister fascination in the ancient and honorable art of stringing a man up by the neck. People have always been that way. William Hynson, of Benton, Montana, is an example, but he didn't get the publicity that Parker did.

One day Bill Hynson was standing on the street corner of his booming pioneer town when another citizen rushed up to him with all the eager anticipation of a man who knows something terrible is going to happen to his best friend.

"Look here, Bill," the man said. "There's going to be a hanging in a few minutes, and we need your help. Come on, will you?"

"Sure," Bill answered, his native sense of justice being aroused. "Who you hanging? What's he done?"

The man, rushing on, turned and spoke over his shoulder. "In a hurry now; tell you later. Run down to the store and get a good stout rope, will you?"

"Sure," Bill Hynson agreed and set out to buy a good stout rope. While he was selecting the rope he dwelt so intensely on the iniquities of mankind that he worked up a real mad at the man who was going to be hanged. People ought to learn right from wrong, then they wouldn't get hung. The guy shouldn't have done whatever it was he had done. Getting himself hanged was his own fault.

Thus Bill Hynson managed to work up a righteous indignation, so that he could do his duty with a clear conscience.

By the time he reached the scene of the hanging, the scaffold was almost completed. He laid his rope down and helped the good citizens finish it.

"Who is this man we're going to punish?" he repeated to his friend.

"You, Bill," his friend said, throwing the rope around Bill Hynson's neck. "You've stolen everything around here you could get your hands on. You've robbed three freight wagons to our certain knowledge, and last night you robbed and killed the wife of our Chinese laundryman. That woman cost our Chinese friend six hundred dollars, and you've got no money to pay him for her. You're a bad man, Bill, and we're cleaning up the town. Now if you will kindly step up there on the platform, we'll get it over as quickly as possible."

It was in this fashion that Bill Hynson served the ends of justice in Montana in 1868. ● ● ●

BLOOD

Doc's horse stopped suddenly, too suddenly

AND GUTS

by TOM ROAN

Doc longed for a bear trophy to hang above his fireplace, and near a Montana river—he met just the ugly, snarling grizzly he wanted!

MOUTH dry, Dr. Ickman Sweeney swore in a whisper as he lowered his glasses. His rifle lay beside him, his horse was in the low timber behind him. There was nothing to fear, yet his breath had deserted him, leaving him like a fiddle string ready to snap as he slumped his short figure closer to ground. Overhead a dwarfed fir made perfect covering, but his teeth were chattering, and his china-blue eyes were like big moons behind his horn-rims.

Eight hundred yards away across the canyon was the biggest and ugliest damned thing Doc Ick had ever seen standing wild and free outdoors. It was what he had come after. Now that he faced it, even from this safe distance, he was struck with buck fever.

The grizzly had appeared only two or three minutes before, a suspicious brute rearing to his hind feet. There he stood, nine feet tall and a full thousand pounds of him, high on the rim in the cool breeze that came up the valley to the south.

It was damned stupid for a man to act this way! But even the bear's precarious position was enough to startle a sane and sober fellow. Even a fool could see that the slip of an inch would mean a straight fall for nearly a mile to the river, that racing streak of water far below in its bed of saw-toothed boulders.

Doc Ick closed his eyes tightly, shutting out the sight for a few seconds. This was what he had asked for. It was the Montana Big Country, one of the highest and wildest sections of the Rockies up near the Canadian border.

Northwest of the cliffs across the river loomed ghost-white Old Baldy, a great dome thrust far above the timber line. Beyond the dome the country was broken with deep canyons and gorges choked with drift-timber washed down from the higher places by spring floods. Once a wild animal dropped into such places, it was safe from all things men might throw at it.

The guides had explained everything late yesterday after pitching the big camp three thousand yards down the valley on the high, level western bank of the river. This time Doc Ick was not going home without a grizzly and he was going to shoot it himself.

It was his third trip West to shoot a bear so that he would have the hide to spread as a rug on his penthouse floor and a snarling grizzly head to mount above his fireplace. In spite of his ingrained tightness, each trip had cost a small fortune, and each time he had gone home without so much as seeing a grizzly walking the high places.

Two of the guides, cautiously prowling along the river's rim, had picked fresh bear signs before reporting back to camp at sunrise. Now the great prize was ready for the little man. To make it more certain men and dogs were on the high slopes northwest of the head of the canyon and the cliffs, a guarding line thrown below Old Baldy.

Doc Ick took a good drink from his silver flask, then had to wait a few minutes for the whiskey to take hold. Perspiration still mottled his forehead, but his hands were steadied when he again set his jaws

and lifted his rifle.

Over there on his high shelf, old Crooked Paw was not yet fully aware of the danger that was creeping up on him. Something was wrong here. He had caught a faint taint in the wind. Now it was gone, and only the old and familiar smells of the mountains were coming back to him.

He had slept from late morning to four in the afternoon. He had come out of his den and wound along the ledge, halting several times to scratch his itching rump. He still yawned sleepily, and a tear or two dropped from his eyes.

His nose kept twisting, turning, wrinkling. Suddenly his paws shot outward, whipping the air to him. The sniffs became rapid, turning to snorts and strong sucking sounds. A growl rumbled from him as he swung to his left and came down to rock over and give his rump another thorough scratching, forgetting that the cause of his troubles was not all fleas back there.

Early in the morning there had been the decidedly hot adventure with the bees in the rocks down by the river. Smelling their honey from a ledge a dozen feet above the water, he had started pulling away stones so he could get a paw inside. The bees had immediately gone into action, a thousand buzzing and whizzing little devils stinging his head, his ears, and his eyes.

AT FIRST, he had been able to ignore them while he dragged out gobs of wild honey and swiped it to his mouth. Before long it had grown into a wailing jag. One paw crammed honey into his mouth while the other swiped at the bees, his wails and cries sounding like those of an old woman touching her finger to one buzz-saw after another.

In the middle of the fight the bees had lost all sense of decency. A swarm had settled at the root of his tail, under it and over it, and set him afire with a thousand little torches. With only half enough honey in his belly and much of it smeared over his face, he had been forced to quit the argument and take a belly-bursting dive off the ledge into the cooling waters of the river.

Now it was swollen and tight as a drumhead back there, a fat and rubbery place to sit on, but he had already forgotten the cause of it. Something here was far more important than angry bees. He caught a whiff that made little lights glimmer in his eyes.

Other scents entered it, and with them sounds came to his ragged ears from the other side of a bend in the rocks down the ledge. He knew them for what they were and was not bothered by them. When the other smell came, he came up on his hind feet, the devil of the ledges again, and stood there fanning the air.

It was the way old Mamook found him when she rounded the bend. Porky, her cub, was a quarter-grown brat who had to be given a growl and a paw-spat to his flat rear now and then to keep him moving instead of stopping to start an argument.

This was something. Pa and Ma and the baby together, and both Mamook and Crooked Paw probably having forgotten who had fathered the dear boy!

Their greetings were as usual. Porky stopped, wailed, and lunged back against his mother as if he had suddenly come face to face with the devil. Mamook banged his rump, lifting him and pitching him forward on his nose. Some hot quarrel with him down in the heavy brush thickets along the river had sharpened her temper. As she struck the cub, she growled at Crooked Paw, and he gave her his best sneer.

Then Mamook caught something in the wind and came up with a snarl, turning to look back over her shoulder. Down closer to the river the wind had been above her. Now it was steadying, and on it rode a smell to arouse fury in any bald-faced grizzly.

Then, as if evil had sent its warning smell ahead, there was a sudden, shrieking burst of sound. Dust and broken bits of rock flew from the overhanging rocks, as something whined skyward.

PORKY wailed. Wheeling, he would have started back down the ledges, but Mamook flashed a paw to the side of his head, spinning him around and back on his rump. His next wail was cut short by a stroke that lifted him and scooted him on, his mother's bear-curse telling him to get going and keep going.

Crooked Paw needed nothing to tell him it was time to go. He had already wheeled and in long-rolling jumps was leading the way up the ledge, bound for the safety of the higher places. Another whine filled the air, and the same slapping and shattering sound. Dust and broken bits of rock showered down on him.

Fall was here, and the two-legged big-game hunters were back! It was time for all things to run, for all the wild things to hunt their holes and stay there. As if bullets and the sounds of a rifle were not enough, somewhere down along the river dogs lifted a savage barking.

Old Baldy was the towering landmark of safety, and Crooked Paw was leading the way toward it just as he had often done in the past. He reached the top of the cliffs, coming out on the high flat where the rattlesnakes made their homes in the rocks. With no time to quarrel and fight with the snakes today he turned northwest. After a dozen rods another new and terrifying danger suddenly made itself known straight ahead.

Horsemen and dogs were waiting up there in the distance, and it was sudden hell without warning. A rifle bullet wailed, and a shattering report rocked up and down the high places. Dust spurted from the ground ahead; Crooked Paw was aware of bits of earth and splinters of gravel peppering his face. Something had clipped his jaw, spilling warm blood in his mouth.

More shots came, and bobbing figures popped up ahead. The wind was in their favor and was keeping their scents away from the bears. Bullets whipped the ground now, cutting long grooves, and howled away like invisible devils.

A swing to the right brought the bears behind a long, loaflike bench of rocks. Here was shelter for a few rods, although the bears were not so much seeking shelter as trying to get away from the noise ahead and let their enemies go on.

An accident happened here, and it was brought about by the all-wise hunters themselves. Another waiting and watching group of men was straight ahead. With them was a pack of dogs being held and kept quiet beyond another bench of rocks, low trees, and brush.

Like everything else, it happened all at once and without warning. Dogs whined, yelped, struggled and suddenly they had got loose from their masters and came pitching down over the rocks. Another terror was added in the wailing and baying of the dogs, the cursing and yelling of the startled men who were trying to call them back.

Unknowingly, Porky did the right thing. He swung fast to the right, beating his mother's paw-stroke that would have put him back in line. Once in the clear, he lunged to his hind feet and clamped his forepaws to his ears. He was like a scared little fat boy, running from his mother to escape a sound thrashing, giving out one heart-broken wail of woe after another.

Mamook followed him, meaning to fan the tar out of him. Her growls and the sounds of her claws on the rocky ground turned old Crooked Paw. In times like these there was strength and sympathy in numbers, just as startled people gang together in the face of fire or flood, everybody too scared and uncertain to go it alone.

Porky, still in the lead, was down on all-fours now, showing his big mother what he could do. Fear and the instinctive driving force of fear made him exert every ounce. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. Until now life had been filled with blissful ignorance. Now and then he had been in trouble, but it had been just enough for a slap to the head or a popping scoop to the stern.

It was not to be understood by a cub. His mother was the greatest thing on earth. She could whip anything that walked or flew or crawled on its belly.

In all his ramblings with her he had seen her turn aside for only one thing. A skunk could make her give the trail, although she quarreled and growled and smacked Porky to make him keep his respectful distance. Some day he would catch one of those little black and white things alone and then he would see about that business. Once his eyes were blinded and he was given the smell of all smells, he would never bother a skunk again.

NOW they were going down behind the eastern wall of the blocklike uprise of the cliffs. Only a thin stream lay below here, far down in the bottom of another gorge that was choked with brush and drift timber. A slip meant death, here as well as on the other side of the cliffs, but there was no turning once Porky had struck the upper end of a winding shelf.

Crooked Paw had had the brunt of the bullets up there above the old rattlesnake dens and now, behind Mamook and the cub, he was on the end to meet the dogs. A wild and noisy full dozen of the maddened brutes were bearing down on him with the foolish notion that they were going to tear him apart on the run. The leaders had never tangled with a grizzly. Any dog who ever had would have had more sense. Getting too close to a grizzly was like facing a devil who would slap him into kingdom come with a single lightning stroke.

Two big dark gray brutes, half-great Dane, were in the lead. Crooked Paw was trying to keep one eye on the sloping ledge that narrowed and twisted dangerously. It was not his habit to run when there was a one-to-ten chance for him to stand and fight. Fighting was his business, and woe to any living thing that met a grizzly eye to eye in any kind of row.

Crooked Paw had no real fear of the dogs. Given a rock wall at his back, they might have come by the score. There he would have stood, a reaper of death, meeting them as they came, a two-handed killing thing that would smack their heads from their bodies and send their bloody carcasses flying through the air.

He wheeled when the two big dogs were almost on his rump. From him came a wail that was like an old man's cry of despair. His forepaws lifted. Any coward would have taken it as a sign of sudden and hopeless surrender. Smarter dogs would have known better. A grizzly surrendered only when he was dead, his body limp and not another wham or bam left in him.

It was suicide. The first dog was coming so fast he couldn't have stopped if he had tried. As the bear wheeled up to face him, the dog let out one last bark and shot upward for the wide-open throat in front of him.

Here was the first and the last bear the two big dogs were ever to meet. The bear's right forepaw shot downward so fast there was not even a blur of movement. It caught the first leaping dog flat on the head, crushing his skull and breaking his back.

In a jammed together wad the dog flew backward. He smashed into the second dog and knocked his feet from under him. Before that startled fellow could right himself, he had slipped off the ledge whining and yelping as he plunged through space. The dead dog plummeted after him, turning end for end into emptiness.

Crooked Paw wheeled and was bounding on, not foolish enough to stand there and wait for the other dogs that were stringing down the ledge. Jamming up after stopping him, the wiser ones would keep their distance, baying and howling to hold him until the hunters could come up with their guns and finish the job.

It was a good thing that he had turned —Mamook and the cub were just leaving him—or he might have gone bounding on down the ledge and into the gun-laden arms of more trouble at the foot of the cliffs.

Again Porky had done the right thing without knowing it. He had come to the mouth of a large black hole in the rocks. Before entering such a place, Mamook would have taken time to smell and inspect. Being young and scared and in a hurry, Porky had gone right in. Growl-

ing and snarling, not liking it at all, the old she-bear followed.

Crooked Paw was in time to see the rear end of Mamook just disappearing. A few yards more, and he was prodding her in the stern with his scarred nose, his growls telling her to get along before the remaining dogs on the ledge came up and started to tear the rear end out of him.

This time the dogs were showing sense. Those in the lead having spotted Crooked Paw's disappearing act, came raging and charging to the hole. Three went inside, but only for a yard before they came to a baying halt, while the others raised merry damnation with their voices behind them on the ledge. All the hunters in Montana would never be able to force those brutes to fight it out in the dark.

UP AHEAD Porky was still in the lead. There was no stopping now with all those dogs, guns, and men back there, and Mamook had ceased growling at the cub. Once she hesitated as if about to stop and wheel to give Crooked Paw some of her mind and a bat on the head to make him watch his nose, but even that had to wait until there was more room or light ahead.

It was a good hole, long and winding, going upward for a short distance, then winding downward as if it would never come to an end. The noise of the dogs was soon blotted out by the bends and turns. At last the half-musical fall and smell of running water came to them from ahead, making both the old bears lick their chops expectantly.

Porky stopped when he came to the water. It was an icy little pool outlined by a thin sliver of light that came from a crack somewhere in the rocks, and soon the bears had had their fill and were moving on. Beyond the water, the way narrowed and grew black again with Porky clicking on. The cub had already forgotten the terror behind and was indifferent to any other dangers that might face them.

Left to himself, it might have been the end of him. He smelled the danger ahead but ignored it, always indifferent until trouble came to him. When Mamook growled, he merely increased his pace to a rolling trot, growling back across his shoulder in the darkness to tell her to watch those paws and keep them off of his behind.

Porky tumbled them into it, the bright young fellow who rarely watched where he was going. He came to the edge of a sudden slope and fell, his heels in air and wailing with fear. In a swift slide he went down on his nose and belly on a well-worn pitch of rock, and came to a halt in a heap forty feet down. An instant later, Mamook's big figure bundled into him, and behind the she-bear came the startled and snarling Crooked Paw, bear-cursing cubs and all mothers of cubs in the darkness.

Growls and snarls were now shot back at them, accompanied by the sounds of other swiftly padding feet in the shadows. A dim light filtered through breaks in the rock ceiling and walls of a round underground chamber. In the dimness, three long shapes shot upward to a shelf and crouched there with tails furiously lashing.

Here was the promise of a fight a grizzly could get into. Mamook and Crooked Paw swung up to their feet. Porky was up at the same time, the whimpering brat in trouble again and backing his oft-banged rump against his mother's big belly for protection.

Three big cougars faced the bears, a mean old female and two near-grown young males. This was a den long-used by cougars, and the unexpected coming of the bears brought overwhelming panic for the huge cats. Cowardly at best, they wanted no part of the invaders. Night prowlers that usually shunned daylight, they had been sound asleep, and the spilling of water in the passageway had deadened the sounds of the approaching bears.

The sudden appearance of the grizzlies was enough to strain the heart and guts of any cougar. Up there on the shelf they were growling and coughing, showing their fangs, and looking as ferocious as possible. Every hair was standing on end, and terror had turned their eyes to balls of yellow fire in the filtering light.

Escape was the only thing—if there had only been a chance. Startled out of their sleep, the old female had jumped in the wrong direction, and the younger ones had followed. A long passageway that led to the ledges above the river was still half open.

The old female took the chance, suddenly shooting forward with a terrific cat-squall that might have stopped a bull-elephant in his tracks. With little more than a yard to spare she passed the old he-bear, his furious paw-stroke slashing for her, his miss staggering him. Before he could get his balance and get set for another stroke, the younger cougars were past him, snarling and spitting, and the bears were left to do what they damned well pleased with the den.

DOWN on the river in the saddle of a spirited little bay, the most excited man in Montana was Doc Ick Sweeney. A few shots from his high-powered rifle had convinced him that this business was more exciting than pulling all the teeth on the Atlantic seaboard. The maddening thrill of the kill was upon him, all else forgotten. Wheeling back to his bay horse, he had come galloping down the slopes, a man gone wild as he cut around the mouth of the canyon to spur across the river with his rifle lifted at arm's length above him.

The bay might have spoiled the hunt on harder ground. Like most short-coupled and sturdy small horses, he was as quick as a trigger on his feet. Not understanding the bridle-path buggy-driving pull and saw on the reins, the horse suddenly made a turn to the right. Doc Ick wanted to go to the left, and he went to the left, abruptly leaving the saddle and crash landing in the brush and briars.

It was like delivering a man to the gate of opportunity. Unhurt except for a few scratches, Doc Ick sawed his way out of the tangle, the rifle ready and a six-shooter dangling behind him in his handsome cartridge belt. Seconds later he was down on his knees, eyes popping, the rifle up and blazing.

No one below the lower end of the cliffs knew where the cougars had come from, but there they were, three big cats racing along a ledge and scurrying around a bend. Shooting at seventy yards with his rifle's sights set for eight hundred, it was sheer luck that Doc Ick downed the leading cat with his second shot, his bullet catching it squarely between the eyes.

With one cat down, the others wheeled and raced, snarling, back up the ledge, while the little man with the big gun kept shooting as fast as he could whip the bolt back and forward. Only the bullets themselves could have told where they were going, high and low and everywhere, but for once in his life little Doc Ick was making a hell of a lot of noise, a hero standing his ground in the Big Country in the face of charging lions. . . .

Back in the den it was sudden hell to pay when the two cats returned, scared completely out of their wits and running for their lives. A blazing rifle below and yelping dogs coming down the ledge above them had left no other place for them to go.

Mamook and old Crooked Paw were busy at the moment. They stood on their hind feet, belly to belly, forepaws on each other's shoulders like a pair of maudlin drunks while the she-bear licked the blood from the old bear's jaw where the bullet had grazed him. A sudden wail of terror from the cub threw them apart as if a gun had been fired between them.

Porky had been left to himself for a few moments. Ever curious, he was heading for the ledge outside when the two big cats raced in, and he was literally knocked back toward the older bears.

Mamook and Crooked Paw instantly turned on the cats, and for a few seconds hair and bits of hide flew in all directions. The cougars were leaping and snarling, but neither was trying to fight back. Their terrorized interest was still centered in the idea of a getaway.

One shot to the right, the other to the left, their cat-squalls of fury filling the den and reaching to the crazed dogs on the ledge. Now, behind the big bears, the mouth of the long hole to the east side

of the cliffs had been opened. Quicker than the bears could turn the cats were through it, fleeing in the darkness and sure to run into more trouble if they reached the ledge that overhung the timber-choked gorge.

Well, now, this was more like it! Again the big den belonged to the bears. Mamook, being a female, rammed her scarred nose into Crooked Paw's face, her growls telling him in bear language what a big

RODEO IS BIG BUSINESS

From the local celebration, attracting only neighboring people, rodeo has grown into big business, employing the full time of thousands of ranchers who raise rodeo stock, performers who follow the circuit almost the whole year round, and the necessary promoters and their help.

The largest recorded attendance at any single performance would be socko boxoffice in any sport. At one performance, there were 104,000 paid admissions, at which point doors had to be closed because of the lack of standing room. Many two and three-day events have topped this figure, and it is not uncommon for rodeos to sell every available inch of standing room.

—Tex Mumford

and clumsy lout he had turned out to be in letting the cats escape. A whimper from the cub spun her around.

This time Porky had a right to whimper. Yelling and cursing men were now outside on the ledge above the river and were trying to force the dogs inside. Those particular dogs were smart. Only three or four of them had come into the hole and had dropped to their bellies with low whimperings as soon as they were out of reach of the slapping hands and sticks. The others had turned and scurried away, having more sense than their masters who were trying to send them to their death.

With the cougars forgotten almost as soon as they were gone, the cub backed against his mother's belly, the soft and safe warm place. He was willing to wait until old Mamook herself cleared up the situation.

WILD animals trapped in a den could quietly wait for hours, sometimes for several days and nights, without stirring from their dark hiding places. With his life at stake, the grizzly could show an amazing patience that did not belong to a grizzly at all when he was out in the open and given a chance to fight.

The waiting here was not long. Older hunters on the ledge had taken charge. The dogs were being encouraged to keep up their barking, but the smarter men were making them keep their distance, wanting them merely to keep the bears in the hole while other things were done.

Dry wood and green pinetops were brought up and thrust into the hole. Men worked as swiftly as they could, and soon were trying to keep the dogs silent.

Inside the den, the bears instinctively felt that the worst was coming to them. They were restless, their tempers short, their movements jerky and nervous. Mamook smacked the cub to silence when he started another whimpering. As if for good measure she took a whack at old Crooked Paw, suddenly amazing him by sitting him flat on his rump with a lightning blow to the side of the head that might have broken a smaller animal's neck.

They heard the cougars again. Something had turned that pair of big cowards back, and they were returning to the safest place they knew. Scratching up the rocks, they came into the hole and stopped short, for a moment fearing the danger here more than that behind them.

It was not long before a new and worse terror began to show itself. Crackling sounds came from the hole to the ledge above the river, followed by a shadowy curling and twisting grayness. Crooked Paw snorted and sat back against the rocks. Mamook pulled the cub to her

belly, holding him with both paws flattened down like hands against him, her nose working. Crooked Paw growled, fanned at his scarred nose, then rubbed it against his hairy forearm.

There was fire down there in the hole now, its evil odor coming up and reaching into every corner of the den. Every living thing in the Big Country knew the meaning of fire and smoke. Even the cub whimpered, twitching his nose and snorting, blinking his eyes from the acrid bite this new adventure brought to him.

A few minutes later they were huddled together, the older bears with their arms around each other, the whimpering cub hugged to his mother. It might have been a helpless family crouched together in a dark basement, fear holding them while they waited for inevitable calamity to strike.

No longer able to stand it, Crooked Paw came up, snarling and choking, helpless fury filling him. Running like a fat, staggering drunk, he headed for the lower hole. Heat and thicker smoke immediately turned him back. Growling at Mamook and the cub, he headed for the slope to the high hole, scratching and clawing upward. With a spank to the cub's rump, Mamook followed him.

Having the lead and meaning to keep it, Crooked Paw met the cougars head on as they neared the pool. Bears and cougars were between two fires now, with smoke boiling in from the holes at each side of the cliffs. Down in a crouch, Crooked Paw snarled and lunged straight on; the cougars wheeled, slashing at each other as they were forced to turn back.

Desperation at the pool made the cats do the thing they might have done before. In his panic, the one in the lead turned, as if suddenly remembering something, and shot himself upward. He clawed himself onto a narrow shelf where the water was coming down and in another moment had disappeared in the blackness. The second cougar whipped furiously upward after him.

Crooked Paw stopped at the edge of the pool. He had seen the second cougar disappear. A poor climber at best, he stood there blinking, the cub and old Mamook colliding with his rump. A heavier cloud of smoke from the passageway beyond the water decided him. He turned, feeling upward with scratching claws. As if nature had prepared them for him, he found strong cracks. Clawing into them he went up, a crying old man leading the way for the mother and son behind him.

IT WAS after midnight when Crooked Paw banged into a scared cougar on the east side of the cliffs and saw it crash into the one ahead. Both clawing, scratching animals rolled straight out into a noisy hell washed in bright moonlight.

Out on a shelf near the foot of the ledge it was bloody murder with the dogs slashing in and the cougars slashing back as they spit and yelped. Never one to hesitate, Crooked Paw plunged out of the low hole and into the middle of the fracas, clearing the ledge with powerful swings of his deadly forepaws.

Cougars and dogs went off the shelf in a fighting and clawing ball. Limbs of low pines cracked and crashed below, heavy brush popped. The fighting ball rolled on into the dark piles of old timber filling the gorge, the cougars battling to break free and run for their lives.

More dogs raced up the ledge, others came down it in a noisy cloud. The battling giant on the shelf was still swinging those powerful forepaws. For hours he had trailed the two cougars through underground holes and runways with Mamook and Porky at his heels. With moonlight and clear air around him, he seemed to be waiting for Mamook and the cub, now only two rods behind him.

When the she-bear and the cub came, Porky was again wailing his woes. Eyes old to trouble, Mamook saw opportunity right ahead and gave the cub a shove that sent him rolling off the shelf and down into a pinetop. Before he could reach the ground she was in the air behind him—it was anything to get out of this wild-howling mess.

Crooked Paw's mind was made up when

a rifle crashed from a dark pocket eighty yards below him and its bullet raked across his shoulder. A moment later he was taking the plunge. More dogs had come rushing in, seeing their opportunity. Two of the devilish things were fastened to his back as he went down. The rifle below was joined by another, and their thundering reports filled the gorge.

Down in the piles of timber and brush, it was more to a fighting grizzly's liking. One of the dogs still clung to the back of his neck as if his fangs had become hooked in Crooked Paw's tough old hide. He raked the dog off with a swipe that hurled it toward old Mamook. Her paw shot out in a whamming stroke, caught the dog in midair and sent him smashing against a log.

Rifles were still filling the gorge with crashing shots as if the men firing them cared little whether they hit dogs or bears. Three or four bullets struck close to the bears, then they were going out of sight in the drift timber.

When dawn came, the battle was still raging two miles north of the cliffs in a deep, cliff-walled basin, its floor dotted with knolls that were capped with jack-pines. Every yard of ground was bloody, for the dogs had never let up.

High above the scene rode a Napoleon. Doc Ick was up there, the wild-eyed dude bouncing in his saddle, pounding the kidneys out of his horse while he clung to the saddle-horn. He pulled up on the rim of a steep slope and wiggled his short, duck-legged figure out of the saddle. The good rifle was now slung behind his back on its stout strap. Dropping to a squat, elbows propped on his knees, he lifted his fine binoculars. His eyes bugged.

The dogs had the bears stopped again against a rimrocked knoll near the western wall of the basin. There they stood with their rumps to the rocks, heavily outnumbered by the swarm of snapping and snarling dogs.

With his grizzly fighting spirit roused at last, Porky was between his mother and the big male, reared back against the

[*Turn page*]

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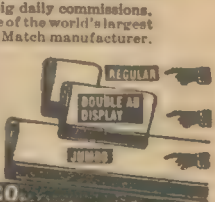

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rocks, forepaws swinging. As Doc Ick stared at them, he saw one dog get too close to the old female. To his dying day Doc Ick would say that he saw the dog explode like a bombshell in the air, one terrible paw-stroke from the bear bursting him to bits that scattered all around.

DOC ICK climbed back into his saddle, turned the horse, and spurred straight down a slope any cowboy in Montana would have avoided. Sliding, stumbling, frantically pawing for footing, the horse made it, his rider hanging both to mane and saddlehorn, his feet helplessly dangling from the stirrups.

Three hundred yards further on the little horse was pulled to a halt. A big emptiness filled Doc Ick's stomach. In Big Country lingo, he was up to the place where the hair was getting ready to burn and guts were about to fly. He swung the rifle forward. This time he looked at the sights, knowing they were set at point-blank but making sure. Shooting from a saddle was something he had never done. Reluctantly he swung down, keeping a tight grip on the reins while he waited for a violent trembling to leave him.

The bears forced the issue. As if acting on some agreed signal, they were sliding on around the base of the rise, still trying to keep their rumps to it. Seeing a man with a gun close at hand, the dogs charged in, barking and snarling fools, and several of them got too close to the bears this time.

Doc Ick fired his first shot, through flying dogs and blood, the heavy kick of the rifle rocking him back against the horse. His bullet was high and smacked into the rocks a full yard above the old male bear, shattering rock and sending up a mushrooming cloud of gray dust.

He killed a dog with the second shot. He swore and pumped another shot into the wild hell in front of him, then another and another, the bullets going high or wide in his tremendous excitement. The magazine was emptied before he could realize it, and he slammed in another clip. Before he could fire again the bears were gone around the rise, the dogs madly following them and getting the worst of it each time they came too close to those great, slashing paws.

It was a poor showing for anybody who wanted to be a mighty hunter. Doc Ick cursed himself as he climbed back in the saddle.

Smart, those bears! They had pulled a fast one. On the other side of the rise, they had plunged into a brush-covered little ravine and were now heading for the cliffs. The thick brush above and at either side hampered the charging dogs, leaving room for a rush only directly behind the old she-bear.

Doc Ick did the smart thing now. He wheeled away and galloped on to get ahead of the bears and cut them off against the foot of the cliffs. As he came to the place, he saw the hole in the foot of the rocks and knew that he was just in time to prevent a complete escape of the bears. Here in an old dry water-way they could go right on into the cliffs, and no man could tell where they would go after that.

In his excitement, Doc Ick made the last mistake. He was right in what he wanted to do but wrong in the way he tried to do it. On the other side of the ravine was a tall spur of rock. By leaving the saddle and letting the horse go, he could have scrambled up, taken his stand in safety, and opened fire straight down on the bears as they came along just below him.

ANY hunter with his wits about him would have done it that way. Doc Ick made the mistake of his life when he tried to force the little horse to jump the ravine instead of crossing it at a slower pace. Spurring and yelling, beating the horse's rump with the stock of the rifle, he charged forward, white-faced.

The little horse acted like any quick horse would have when a man tried to force the impossible. He put on his brakes a couple of jumps from the rim of the ravine. Forefeet gouging outward in stiffened stilts, he buck-jumped to a sudden halt.

Doc Ick dropped his rifle and kept right

on going, silenced by surprise and fear. Landing ten feet down on the rock floor of the ravine, he felt a lightning pain shoot up his right leg. His head seemed to bang like a gun at the same instant, and the world went black and still around him.

Minutes later Doc Ick opened his eyes, and no living man ever came nearer to looking hell squarely in the eye. Above him and not a foot away was a snarling grizzly's face, an old bear crying out of one side of his mouth and leering from the other, the long fangs as yellow as gold, the little-pig eyes shining like buttons—the same kind of a head Doc Ick had wanted to hang above his fireplace. A bear whine might have been a question as to what he was doing here. He fainted instead of answering, blackness again mercifully saving him from the growling, the snarling, and blood splattering that took place right after that.

Twenty minutes later it was quiet. A man lying in a mess of blood and guts that belonged to dogs making their last mad rush to stop the escaping bears. A guide found him like that, cursing and crying in the mess, his leg broken, the hunt ended.

"You're all right, Doc." The guide patted his shoulder. "Got what it takes. Blood and plenty of guts! They got away, but you'll come back next fall and do better shooting."

"Next fall?" Doc Ick tightened his jaws, trying to steady his white and trembling lips. "To hell with next fall! I'm not—coming—back." ● ● ●

COWBOY BRAIN-TEASERS

(Answers to puzzles on page 85)

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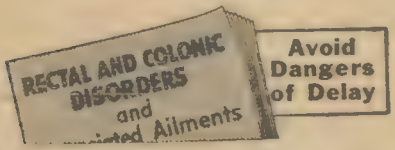

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TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 6)

game, with plums and berries to ward off scurvy.

Hunting and Trapping

In groups of six or eight these men built their winter shelters along streams, one half hunting and guarding while the other half trapped. A bale of sixty pelts weighed one hundred pounds and brought one hundred dollars in St. Louis. Very few ever saw any of the fruits of their labors. At regular intervals a trader met them at a pre-arranged rendezvous to bring new supplies and kegs of the vile, cheap whiskey made in Taos and called "Taos Lightning." For about three days hell really broke loose among these bearded men. They played cards for one another's pelts, told tall stories, ran foot races, fought and killed among themselves.

In his formative years, Jim Beckwourth followed the pattern of this breed, doing his share of drinking and fighting and taking his share of warm, reeking, bloody scalps from downed Indians. In those wild days all tribes were capricious, except the Dakotas, whom their enemies called "Sioux," a term of derogation. The Sioux fought the whites at all times. The Crows, Pawnees, Kiowas, Arapahos, and others would be friendly today and massacre tomorrow.

A Friend of the Crows

Beckwourth met the Crows during one of their friendly moods, and these very black-faced Indians appear to have taken a great liking to this man whose face bore

some resemblance in coloring to their own. When he became a trader and proved to be one of the very small minority who dealt fairly and wouldn't bring whiskey, Jim Beckwourth was as safe in Crow country as one of the tribe's own people.

Eventually he married one of their black-faced beauties and lived with them between trading trips!

The "White" Indian

In the years that followed, Beckwourth became celebrated not only among the whites but among the Crows. How many white people he saved because of his standing among the Indians is a matter of conjecture, but they must have been many. How many attacks he prevented by a people hungry for guns and other wagon supplies was never known. To the Crows he was a "white" Indian who fought as ferociously as one of their own warriors against the Sioux and the vicious Blackfeet. It was in a battle with the latter that this mountain trapper, chief of the Crows since the death of old A-ra-poo-ash, became almost sacred among them and a new legend among the whites he had trapped with.

A party of thirty or more tough young Blackfeet bucks made a sudden raid into Crow country and not far from the main camp audaciously killed some boy herders and made off with the horses. Without waiting to take off his trapper's clothes and daub himself up a bit, Beckwourth yelled a command at about twenty near-by Crow men and set off in hot pursuit. They spotted their quarry within an hour, and the Blackfeet, believing overwhelming numbers were following, ducked down to the foot of a precipice and threw up a semicircular breastwork of logs.

War Dance

In the attack that followed the Crows showered arrows and bullets without injuring a single enemy. With their, at

[*Turn page*]

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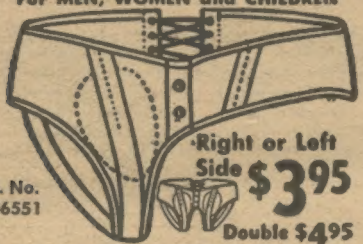

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times, ridiculous idea of warfare, some of Beckwourth's men began to dance around in plain sight of the Blackfeet and dare them to shoot at them. The raiders quickly obliged, four or five Crows went down, and Jim Beckwourth, the mulatto, had had enough. Roaring at his men for being fools, he jerked off his buckskins and, armed only with a hatchet and knife, climbed above the barricade. Followed by half his men, he jumped squarely into the Blackfeet and began slashing and hacking with knife and hatchet. The remainder of his men rushed in a frontal attack and almost sixty naked Indians, jammed body to body in a small pit, soaked the ground with red and splashed it against the rocks. Not a Blackfoot escaped, and Jim Beckwourth, drenched with their blood, became immortal among his adopted people.

In 1866, Jim Beckwourth, then an enfeebled old man, left the Peace Commission at Fort Laramie and went back to see his Crow subchiefs. It was his last trip. He died among his adopted people, probably from the effects of old wounds. He had fared much better than most others of the mountain breed and, besides, had been a strong influence in the settling of a virgin wilderness.

—William Hopson

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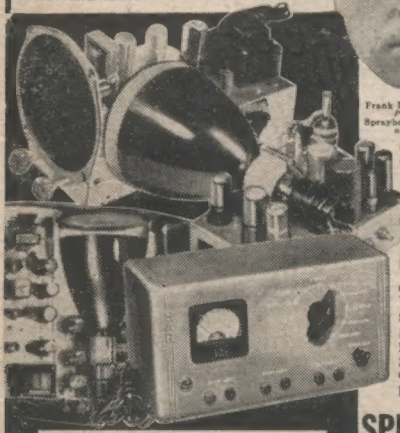

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